

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Geoffrey H. Hartman and the Challenge of Reading Postmodern Fiction**

Soultouki, Maria

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# **Geoffrey H. Hartman and the Challenge of Reading Postmodern Fiction**

**by**

**Maria Soultouki**

**BA English Literature**

**MA Religion and Literature**

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**Department of  
English and Creative Writing**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis re-engages the work of the distinguished literary critic, Geoffrey H. Hartman as a means of interpreting postmodern literature. Contemporary literary criticism has acknowledged the value of Hartman's work in thinking about contemporary culture but, until now, there have not been any attempts to apply his interpretative methods to the reading of postmodern fiction. By identifying some of Hartman's main concerns and drawing on his revisions of his theory, this thesis offers a case study of a selection of postmodern texts, which are characteristic of the challenges that postmodern literature presents. The postmodern literary text becomes challenging for literary interpretation through its extreme experimentation and by textually transgressing traditional forms of narration. The postmodern text's incorporation of images, its attention and use of assonance, and its itinerate, indiscriminate assemblage of diverse creative expressions complicates the interpretive task. I aim to show how Hartman's critical contribution can inform the reading of the postmodern text but also, how the consideration of the postmodern highlights the significance of Hartman's theoretical work.

I begin by developing the complexities that the consideration of postmodern literature and Hartman's critique present and relate the authors and texts that become the focus of this investigation in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 considers the relationship of the postmodern text to its use of illustrations and images and explores what this relationship manifests for the nature of the postmodern. Chapter 3 draws on Hartman's understanding of literary interpretation as the listening for different meanings of the word, with particular attention to the typographical manifestations of the dissemination of meaning in the creation of the postmodern novel. Chapter 4 examines the implications of the postmodern rejection of

modernist concerns, in literary interpretation and postmodern theory and the effects of the postmodern condition on the development of identity and historical consciousness. Chapter 5 focuses more closely on the problems of narrative orientation and direction that develop through typographical experimentation and relates these concerns to the challenge of following Hartman's intellectual progressions in his critical contributions. The final chapter of this thesis explores the nature and role of the contemporary critical essay in the postmodern condition and the future of literature.

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Finally, I wish to thank my family for their support. In the Christian Orthodox tradition my mother's name, Olga, is the name of a woman who became a Saint because of her lyrical and discursive abilities. My mother's persuasive words have counselled me to stay on course with my research choices and her loyalty has been my foundation. My brothers, George and Paul, have stimulated my work with their insightfulness, as both my challengers and invigorators. I am also grateful to my friends and companions, for their help, support and comments on my work. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Paul and Maria, my grandparents. They never had the chance to have a proper education but they made sure I did.

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‘And I can learn to love and make love to the paradoxes that bug me  
and on really romantic evenings of self  
I go Salsa dancing with my confusion.’

*Waking life* (2001)

‘Great art is radical.’

Geoffrey Hartman,  
*Criticism in the Wilderness*, 98.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### ‘The Challenge’

Without Aeolus, without responsive lyre,  
without unction or wild auditors,  
I speak to you, whoever you may be,  
in ship’s belly, whale’s belly, your own,  
hiding from these vomit-words of old.

I am the mortal year, and in your heart,  
insinuate a last formal clinging,  
some right of song, due pause, and firm inscription:  
Bring now unwonted fire to your lips.

Soon is your middle year, your Christ year past,  
the beasts you met or fled from in the wood,  
convert them in the eagle fields of mind  
and test their stubbornness with stubs of song.  
Bring now unwonted fire to your lips.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis aims to examine the nature and position of the postmodern text, and show how Geoffrey H. Hartman’s theoretical contribution can assist the reading and interpretation of postmodern fiction. In this introductory chapter I will set up the main concerns that are the objects of examination in this thesis. The chapter differs significantly from those that follow: here I attempt to map out and organize the complexities of Hartman’s criticism, postmodern theory and the postmodern novel; subsequent chapters are less programmatic and develop extended close readings of critical and literary texts. This introduction consists of three

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *The Bible in Italy and Other Poems*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004.

sections. The first section, “The Postmodern Challenge”, contains two parts: the first outlining the difficulties that the postmodern condition presents for literature and criticism and setting out my approach and focus; the second offering further clarification of my reading of the term postmodern through extended discussion of the work of Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon. In the second section of the chapter I introduce the work of Geoffrey H. Hartman and attempt to establish what I believe to be his significant role in the reading of the postmodern text. Aware that Hartman’s commentary does not engage with the reading of the postmodern text, I demonstrate here that his critical contribution and interpretation of other works of fiction and poetry may not only assist but are essential in the interpretation and reading of postmodern fiction. The last section of this chapter identifies some critical and theoretical tendencies in Hartman’s work that, as I will argue, also concern postmodern theory and contemporary literary criticism. Here, I will be introducing the authors and texts that this thesis will be focusing on and I will be detailing my methodology. Taken together, my thesis concentrates on and contributes to the discourses of postmodern fiction and explores the ways in which the reinvention of Hartman’s work is significant for interpreting the postmodern text.

### **1.1.a. The Postmodern Challenge.**

Postmodernism has become quite a fashionable term in the last few decades. John D. Caputo captures the beat of the contemporary critical condition eloquently when he concedes that he uses the term as a catchword whenever he wants to ‘draw a crowd’: ‘when I run a conference, I always say it’s about post-modernism’, he admits with disarming honesty.<sup>2</sup> Still, the abundance of critical responses to the postmodern manifests criticism’s fascination with it. Regardless of their critical stance, responses to the postmodern are all demonstrative of the

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo, “Postmodernism and Religion,” interview with Luke Muehlhauser, *Common Sense Atheism*, September 15, 2010, accessed September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010, <http://commonsenseatheism.com/?p=9750>.

allure of the term. The spectrum of thinkers that have engaged or grown out of postmodern criticism is overwhelmingly impressive: celebrated theorists such as Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman and Michel Foucault, to name a few, focus on the postmodern condition and address the issue of the nature of the postmodern, exploring its impact in culture and literature.<sup>3</sup> Even more, the discourse of the postmodern has gravitated into its orbit literary critics and philosophical thinkers that do not deal directly with the postmodern but engage with aspects and qualities of it. From Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, Hillis J. Miller, Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, Richard Rorty or Slavoj Žižek to Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Søren Kierkegaard, the postmodern critique upholds and accommodates intellectual thinkers that are involved in hermeneutics, language, and political and cultural criticism.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, one of the challenges of the postmodern is the large scope of philosophical thought that it unravels and presents us with. At the same time, the immense theoretical range of ideas that the postmodern communicates with is indicative of an intrinsic element of its critical nature. Postmodern criticism tends and even seeks to be demotic: it popularizes critical discourses that have been thought of, until recent times, as obscure and inaccessible (such as the writings of Derrida, for example). Yet, at the same time, this postmodern accessibility is criticized for

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<sup>3</sup> Indicatively, see Ihab Hassan's *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), Jean-François Lyotard's, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report to Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), Frederic Jameson's, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), Jean Baudrillard's, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib's, "Modernity versus Postmodernity", *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (1981): 3-14, Zygmunt Bauman's, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992) and Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), Hillis J. Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (London: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2009).

oversimplification; postmodernism stands accused of proceeding from reductive readings of complex philosophical debates. In both cases, and in engaging with such a wide range of theoretical debates and discourses, postmodernism appears inevitably infected or inflicted with a sense of obscurity. The problem with postmodernism today, is that it has come to mean too much.

The term has come to sustain an almost mythical quality. As a result, postmodernism appears captivating exactly because it is dubious. One of the aims of this introductory chapter is to establish the reasons for postmodernism's multifaceted complexities, as they have been examined and addressed by some major contemporary thinkers. This section attempts to explore the relationship of postmodernism to poststructuralism, the different approaches, variations and understandings of the postmodern (for example, the differentiation between postmodernism and postmodernity) and the relationship of postmodernism to the postmodern literary text.

The difficulty with postmodernism is that it is always followed by the shadow of its indeterminacy. However popular, postmodernism is accompanied by a sense of dissatisfaction and difficulty that often gives birth to defensive or apprehensive responses, which attempt to either resist or dismiss the concept of the postmodern altogether.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it is with great ease that some label an artistic work that displays extreme experimentation as postmodern. The characterization offers some comfort in designating ambiguity within the limits of a category. However, such appropriations allow a certain acceptance of an impediment in the understanding of the postmodern artifact. As a result, postmodernism often appears synonymous with the accreditation of an impasse that reflects the uncomfortable recognition of our limitations in comprehension.

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<sup>5</sup> In Hartman's words, in the poem "The Challenge" cited in the beginning of this introduction, postmodernism might 'insinuate a last formal clinging', giving voice to critical reservations that respond to its transgressive nature by a return to or the upholding of more traditional modes of thinking.

Despite its creative force, the inability to identify, determine and utilize the postmodern has generated a hesitation or even fear. This fear is not new; every historical turn is accompanied by a sense of uncertainty. Yet the postmodern presents us with a challenge that is unprecedented: it is not simply facing us with the difficulty of a historical and cultural change but with the realization of the prevalence of *change* itself, an ever-changing state where the comforts of stabilization, fixity or assurance are shown to be illusory. In such conditions, the notion of historical shifts is itself transformed and expanded, since any event and every moment of cultural and social development becomes charged with the gravity of great expectations or marred with the deprecation of its significance in the course of things. Of course, the realization that anything can be of importance and the sensitivity with which marginalized voices are now approached has led to richness and greater experimentation in artistic expression; but the various interjections and interventions that seek their legitimization in the postmodern have also incited a cacophony of voices. The continuous changes and reinviogrations of the postmodern establish the tensions that concoct the challenge that the postmodern presents us with.

Any attempt to map out the extreme conditions that condition the nature of the postmodern is destined to be met with the postmodern rejection of dialectic positions. The question arises of *how* to talk about the postmodern and this enquiry is tainted with the reservation of knowing that even if we were to find a suitable articulation of its nature, the postmodern would not be able to sustain or maintain it, exactly because of its fluidity. Despite these adverse conditions, many theorists and literary critics have taken on the postmodern inquiry, producing discourses that illuminate aspects of its morphology and adding to the debates that issue from its nature. This thesis seeks to add to the discourses on the postmodern. To this end, I begin with an outline and the configuration of theoretical debates that shape and surround the postmodern to this day.

Since the 1960s there has been notable critical focus on postmodernism's historicity in an attempt to situate the genre historically.<sup>6</sup> These historical approaches aim to clarify the origins of the postmodern in the hope that deciphering its founding moments can reveal something pertinent about its nature and development. While the word 'postmodernism' can be traced back to references as early as the 1920s and 1930s, what becomes obvious through the historiography of the postmodern is that its conceptual roots are too entangled with technological, philosophical, sociological and cultural developments for it to be conceptualized in clear linear or epochal terms.

Most critiques on the postmodern elaborate, at some point, on the term of the postmodern, not as a historical period but in the different meanings that the word suggests. It is generally understood that the prefix *post* of the *postmodern* designates a 'coming after' or 'later' and as subsequent to what follows, while, at the same time, it denotes a separation and the 'leaving behind' of what it progresses beyond, namely, modernism. As such, the term is intrinsically proposing the co-existence of the antithetical notions of 'taking after' and 'taking over', signalling rejection *and* transformation. Critical responses to the transformative nature of the postmodern appear to echo either or both of these different delineations of the *post* and develop in three main ways: a) by illuminating its continuation from tradition and modernism, b) by emphasizing its rejection of the past and a radical discontinuity and c) by oscillating between the two earlier positions. Hassan is characteristic of the first approach in examining the postmodern in its continuity from modernism. Habermas also views the postmodern as a continuation from the modern but approaches that continuation with

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<sup>6</sup> Indicatively, see Perry Atkinson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998) and Hans Barthe's, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995). Most notably, Fredric Jameson approaches the postmodern as a historical category that must be understood in relation to the development of capitalism in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Taking a different approach, Robert Eaglestone argues that the start of postmodernism in the West is a response to the Holocaust and locates the birth of the postmodern in the impossibility of processing the events of the Holocaust rationally. See particularly Part II in Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

suspicion, proposing a preservation of modernist values and seeking the realization of their full potential in the postmodern.<sup>7</sup> Jameson too, as Atkinson suggests, considers postmodernism as ‘a – playful or portentous – parasitism on the old.’<sup>8</sup> Others, however, such as Foucault, Baudrillard and Lyotard, view the postmodern as an entirely new epoch that comes after a radical rupture from modernism. Foucault views every discourse as an appropriation of power. He argues that the manifestation of that power in art has been emancipatory and sees the arrival of postmodernism as expressive of a crisis of power and its representation.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Baudrillard argues that representation becomes impossible under the pressure of capitalism. Baudrillard’s famous essay “Simulacra and Simulations – The Precession of Simulacra” suggests that the boundaries between image or simulation and the real disappear in the postmodern.<sup>10</sup> Lyotard also examines the problem of representation, warning against totalitarian voices that may silence marginalized ones and declaring the end of grand narratives and the systematization of knowledge that, in modernism, shaped and ruled social discourse.<sup>11</sup> Other theorists such as Richard Rorty or William Spanos, take a different view: Rorty sees that Lyotard’s and Foucault’s rejection of modernism offers no alternatives to the problems of today’s world. Rorty’s pragmatic approach leads him to anti-theorization and the critique of philosophy as insufficient while, at the same time, he still looks back to modernity to idealize the figure of the man of irony. On the other hand, Spanos takes an existential approach to postmodernism, suggesting it is a permanent process of understanding. Yet despite the continuation this suggests, Spanos’s ontology also proposes

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<sup>7</sup> Habermas and Ben-Habib, “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, *New German Critique*.

<sup>8</sup> Atkinson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Hoy, *Foucault: A Critical Reader*.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations – I. The Precession of Simulacra” trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, “The European Graduate School”, accessed June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/simulacra-and-simulations-i-the-precession-of-simulacra/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992).



(via Heidegger's notion of *De-struktion*) a postmodernism that is de-structing, post-modern and against memory or history.<sup>12</sup>

The model of the three options for the categorization of theories and critical analysis on the postmodern may facilitate their better understanding. Apart from organizing major theoretical tendencies, it also reveals the overlaps between critical approaches and it attests to the complex and diverse discourses that are produced in the postmodern condition. Furthermore, a closer inspection of the model may also disclose that a lot of theoretical discourse that deals with the effects of the postmodern condition does not refer directly to or even, rejects the label of postmodernism. While some theorists, like Hassan or Lyotard, engage openly with the postmodern, others, like Foucault, Spanos, Derrida and Barthes have not focused on developing a theory of the postmodern. They reject the title of postmodernist, despite the significant role of their work in cultivating an understanding of the postmodern condition. Spanos, for example, abandons postmodernism to subscribe to poststructuralism in his later work. The parallel development of poststructuralism in literary criticism dilutes but also complicates theoretical differentiations: like poststructuralism, postmodernism rejects the empirical idea that language can represent reality and thrives in the infinite play of signification.<sup>13</sup> But while postmodernism engages more with the changing role of culture today, poststructuralism is more focused on language and the literary text.

Another critical approach to postmodernism distinguishes between postmodernism and postmodernity. Jim McGuigan begins *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* by clarifying in his introduction the different significations of the two terms; for him, 'postmodernism refers to

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<sup>12</sup> William Spanos "The Counter-Memory of Postmodernism" interview by Jeffrey J. Williams, *The Minnesota Review*, accessed July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, [http://www.theminnesotareview.org/journal/ns67/interview\\_spanos.shtml](http://www.theminnesotareview.org/journal/ns67/interview_spanos.shtml).

<sup>13</sup> The distinctions between postmodernism and poststructuralism seem to fade away, particularly in American criticism. Deconstruction, which attends to the gaps and seeks meaning in the language of the text, can often be confused with reader-response theories, which focus on the reader's experience of the text. In Europe, poststructuralism is approached more as a movement beyond structuralism. For more on reader-response criticism see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

philosophical ideas, mainly derived from poststructuralist theory, and cultural formations, especially associated with global popular culture. Postmodernity, in contrast, refers to societal or civilizational claims; and, quite specifically the argument that we are living through the transition from a modern to a postmodern period of history.<sup>14</sup> McGuigan associates postmodernism with poststructuralism and philosophy and their response to globalization, while postmodernity is defined in terms of its reflectivity of a historical transition.<sup>15</sup> Yet, a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity echoes that of theory and practice, ideology and pragmatism, or high and low art, qualifications that constitute the divides that postmodernism transgresses. Nevertheless, I would agree with McGuigan in considering it ‘an extraordinary act of hubris to call one’s own period in history ‘postmodern’.’<sup>16</sup> The periodization of postmodernism and its assignation to the present time is dismissive of the significance of reflection and the necessity of historical distance in the assessment of cultural developments and epochal changes.

Postmodernism’s challenge issues from the collapse of boundaries between history, culture, science, philosophy, theory, literary criticism and the arts. Intellectual and social spheres of autonomy become intruded upon and any sense of hierarchy is dissolved.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, there have been notable attempts to identify the elements of the postmodern. In *The Postmodern Turn*, Hassan deals with the disintegration of boundaries by deciphering, specifying and listing the conceptual difficulties and recurrent tendencies of the postmodern.

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<sup>14</sup> McGuigan Jim, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Graham Ward also wants to sustain this differentiation for functional reasons, in his Introduction to *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). This thesis recognizes the benefits of separating theoretical concerns (postmodernism) from their expressions in society and culture (postmodernity) but it is with hesitation that this distinction occurs in the chapters that follow. Assuming that the qualification allows a degree of clarification in the consideration of postmodernism, McGuigan’s conceptual development of postmodernity remains unsatisfactory, since it does not identify the elements that constitute postmodernity.

<sup>16</sup> McGuigan, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> As Jeremy Green explains, today it is no longer ‘necessary to argue that one kind of cultural activity is superior to another: reading Dante is no better than watching a soap opera. Culture can now be understood and enjoyed without appeal to evaluative criteria founded on aesthetic disinterestedness.’ Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 41.

*The Postmodern Turn* offers a table of dichotomies between modernism and postmodernism, seven major themes in postmodern culture, ten ideological problems in relation to the postmodern, twelve versions or expressions of its cultural indeterminacy, ten frames that critical discourse and responses to the postmodern follow, and eleven features and effects of postmodernism's pluralism. In his systematization, Hassan acknowledges and develops the indeterminacy and immanence of the postmodern. The interactions between his classifications follow the same interconnection and continuity that he identifies between modernism and postmodernism. *The Postmodern Turn* deals with the problem of the postmodern's periodization, by attempting to regulate the collapse of the division between high and low culture that followed modernism.

It is this disintegration that has inspired diverse approaches to the postmodern in academic practises. The rejection of absolutes is treated by Terry Eagleton, according to Patricia Waugh, as a form of postmodern madness, 'a kind of manic-depressive disorder, oscillating between the poles of textualist euphoria and constructivist dystopia both underlyingly expressive of a desiring but decentred subjectivity, obsessed with freedom but with nothing to be free for, in a society which can only be regarded as an oppressive constraint and curb on such freefloating desire.'<sup>18</sup> Waugh moderates this schizophrenic oscillation, identifying different levels of intensity in postmodernity and arguing that 'postmodernism exists in a "strong" and in a "weak" form and that each of these may take on either a deconstructive (epistemological) or a reconstructive (ethical) orientation.'<sup>19</sup> Other critics also explore aspects of the destructive or reconstructive nature of the postmodern,

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Waugh, "Postmodernism" in Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris eds. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume IX Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 299. For more on Terry Eagleton's idea of the postmodern, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). On the relation of the postmodern to the schizophrenic, see also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Waugh, "Postmodernism" in Knellwolf and Norris eds. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 291.

drawing on the technological progression to describe it in more ‘explosive’ terms, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner show:

*The information explosion* could work to either multiply and pluralize information, or to cancel all meaning in a meaningless noise; it could enhance literary skills or deaden them; it could decentralize information so that all people have easy and equal access, or it could further the control and domination of ruling elites who monopolize information and computer technologies. Similarly, *computerization processes* could facilitate new learning skills or perpetuate class inequalities, promote militarist adventures, and increase population surveillance. Computers and robotics could eliminate harsh, physical labour, or produce new forms of slavery; the new technologies could produce a shortened working week and increase leisure time, or lead to massive unemployment. *New media technologies* could activate or stultify the mind, democratize and pluralize information control and homogenization; they could allow new voices to enter a reinvigorated public sphere or increase domination by corporate elites.<sup>20</sup>

Oscillating between the possibilities of growth and cultural annihilation, sanity or madness, the detonating effects of the postmodern condition become a concern for Ward. Ward, however, describes these postmodern tensions as characteristic not of an explosion but of the *implosion* of secularism. He suggests that the conflicting forces of the postmodern condition internalize the explosive force of the postmodern. This internalization is triggered by the postmodern tendency of seeking ways to mediate between opposing dualities. For Ward, this inward fold becomes an integral part in the web of the postmodern condition:

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner eds, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), 302-3.

The implosion occurs when the process of mediation – dialogue, dialectic, and debate – can no longer be held to operate; when certain incommensurable perspectives become apparent; when the subject increasingly loses the distinctiveness of its position and likewise the object; when the natural is seen as already cultivated; when the private is increasingly subject to social policy and internalizes a public surveillance; when the universal is recognized as representing a certain power/knowledge interest which necessarily marginalizes other interests. And so the hierarchy of values implodes, with no appeal possible to an authority outside the system itself – no principle, no shared ontology, no grounding epistemology, no transcendental mediation. And so we move beyond the death of God which modernity announced, to a final forgetting of the transcendental altogether, to a state of godlessness so profound that nothing can be conceived behind the exchange of signs and the creation of symbolic structures.<sup>21</sup>

Ward's postmodern wasteland rehearses the reflexivity of modernism deprived of the nostalgia for a lost order. Here, he echoes Slavoj Žižek's postmodern critique, which identifies the lack of the Other as the cause of reflexivity and the manifestations of paranoia or narcissism in the postmodern. But while Žižek celebrates the dichotomies of the postmodern as indicative of a need for revolution, in Ward the implosion of the secular generates a fetishistic pleasure 'found in the failure to attain what one desires; pleasure is taken in absence itself.'<sup>22</sup> The postmodern comfort with the idea of absence that Ward notes has sometimes been translated as a more permanent state of complete dissolution. Some critiques have perceived the lack of reaction to this profound absence as indicative of a

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<sup>21</sup> Ward ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, xix.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. xxi.

historical and cultural annihilation, a final cultural termination, celebrating a complete departure from history. Most characteristically, Alex Callinicos famously declared that postmodernism is now history, while Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history itself.<sup>23</sup>

The philosophical focus on ‘endings’ leaves us with the designation of the postmodern as a mark or a (final) point. But as Ward suggests, theoretical discourses that proclaim such ‘ends’ do not ‘actually tell us anything.’<sup>24</sup> Drawing on the same sentiments, Green seeks to move beyond terminal points and argues that ‘obituaries for postmodernism are attempts to refuse or dismiss one or another aspect of the problems – of culture, period, and style – to which the word, however vaguely and portentously, gestures. It seems more useful to retain the allusiveness of the term, while registering its *aging*, to recognize, in other words, *postmodernisms*, distinctions of mode and moment within “full postmodernity.”’<sup>25</sup> Green discharges the electric synergy of the postmodern in the stream of historical progression and with this gesture he manages to both sustain the conflicting qualities of postmodernity and channel their continual transformation. However problematic it may be to conceive “full postmodernity”, it is clear that Green’s suggestion becomes characteristic of a wish that seeks to explore rather than limit the postmodern in (de)termination.

The problem with some postmodern critiques is that they appear to subordinate the literary text. While critical work on contemporary fiction continues to emerge, the academic study of postmodern literature appears to be still in a nascent state. As Jameson suggests, that could be because the development of a visual culture in the postmodern has affected the novel. Yet Jameson’s commentary on pastiche reveals that he approaches the postmodern

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<sup>23</sup> See Alex Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 20.

novel as secondary or less original. Lyotard too marginalizes the novel, since as Green eloquently summarizes,

*The Postmodern Condition* relegates art and literature to an appendix, added to the English translation and aimed, presumably, at the book's audience in the humanities, for whom the discussion of scientific legitimation was primarily of interest as an intervention into the debate about modernity. Lyotard's discussion of twentieth-century artistic movements calls for an aesthetic of the sublime, an experimental avant-gardism that puts the "postmodern artist or writer in the position of a philosopher" (81), a philosopher searching for the criteria of judgement that come after the work, rather as if the work throws down the challenge of its own perplexing status and meaning.<sup>26</sup>

In poststructuralism the philosopher/artist distinction disintegrates. Barthes's famous declaration of the death of the Author and Derrida's announcement that there is nothing outside the text, suspend the intentions of the author and seek to explore meaning in the language of the text. The method of deconstruction, which unravels and resurfaces the different and often conflicting meanings of the text, takes into account structuralism's descriptive, binary oppositions but treats the language of the text as porous and as suggestive of an endless deferral of meaning, hybridity and overdetermination that cannot be fixated or categorized. This resistance to determination and categorization characterizes the poststructuralist theorists and becomes evident in their rejection of the label of poststructuralism. Indeed, many so-called 'poststructuralists' have often questioned the nature of poststructuralism, in exploring the nature of the novel.

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<sup>26</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 30.

Both poststructuralism and postmodernism demonstrate a rejection of determination and a crossing of boundaries which accommodates conflicting positions rather than formulating coherent, discursive fields. This transgression and disintegration of boundaries has inspired diverse modes of writing in literature and academic practises. Poststructuralism listens for the different voices of the text, while postmodern literary criticism embraces its hybridity and experimentation as a continuous metamorphic force. It is perhaps easier to think of both as within the process of becoming, since both concepts continue to evolve and attract different significations to this day. As Green suggests, '[t]he bewildering variety of meanings attached to postmodernism is a measure of the term's success; the word has operated like a virus, crossing disciplinary borders and infecting seemingly discrete bodies of thought.'<sup>27</sup> The problem of postmodernism's definition or conceptualization may be confusing but this thesis does not seek to examine the postmodern text as parasitical or in need of a cure. Accordingly, this thesis does not aim to distil a definition of what constitutes the postmodern text but, rather, it endeavours to illuminate some aspects of the postmodern text's polymorphic and transformative nature, in order to examine its effects on language and the future of the novel. The postmodern condition is reflective of the instability poststructuralism notes in language, but the dissolution and dispersing of meaning that they both suggest can be interminable and unappeasable. Today, literature is increasingly dominated by an electronic culture that changes still further the intrinsic qualities of a novel as a book.<sup>28</sup> This thesis will examine the position of the novel in this continuously evolving contemporary landscape.

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<sup>27</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Hillis J. Miller suggests that '[a] book is a pocket or portable dreamweaver' and that the 'printed book will retain cultural force for a good while yet, but its reign is clearly ending. The new media is more or less rapidly replacing it. This is not the end of the world, only the dawn of a new one dominated by new media.' J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature*. (London: Routledge, 2002) 18, 10.



### **1.1.b. Closing In: Ihab Hassan's and Linda Hutcheon's Models for the Postmodern.**

The variety of meanings that have been attached to the term postmodern has been the cause of much confusion. Diverse theoretical responses have constructed images of the postmodern that, while illuminating, are also often contradictory. This section seeks to clarify my own reading of the term by looking more closely at the work of two theorists on the postmodern. Ihab Hassan's famous table of the differences between modernism and postmodernism, which first appeared in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), and Linda Hutcheon's analysis of postmodernism through the model of architecture have both helped construct a view of postmodernism that avoids simplistic systematization. In addition, Hutcheon's and Hassan's theories of the postmodern do not subordinate the literary text: their models of the postmodern find expression through textual analysis and the interpretation of contemporary fiction informs their understanding of the postmodern. The formal qualities of their work are apposite in a thesis that seeks to bring Hartman into conversation with postmodern literature. As will become clear in the analysis that follows, Hassan's and Hutcheon's perceptions of the postmodern have their differences. Yet both share a notion of the postmodern as a versatile and evolving structure, rather than a determined and fixed concept. While building up clear patterns for what is postmodern, Hassan's and Hutcheon's models allow for the disintegration of boundaries that they perceive to be intrinsic to postmodern thought.

Hassan is a prominent critic of contemporary fiction and one of the first theorists to coin and develop the critical conception of postmodernism. In his early career, Hassan was preoccupied with what distinguishes post Second World War fiction from modernist works of fiction. In *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (1961) Hassan explores some problems of form in the contemporary novel by focusing on the image of the hero in contemporary American fiction, in order to argue that the contemporary self 'recoils,

from the world, *against* itself' and that this movement becomes reflected in the evolving form of the novel.<sup>29</sup> *Radical Innocence* begins with an exploration of the social and historical influences that affect the definition of the contemporary hero in America. For Hassan, the existential troubles of the fictional American hero are reflected in the American novel's 'critical awareness of *loss*, its ironic cultivation of human *vulnerability*, its bitter generosity toward all things *quixotic* and infrangible. The black stream of violence which flows through its pages wells from a turbid and extravagant hope, a radical innocence.'<sup>30</sup> As Hassan observes, the form of the book changes because 'the novel no longer finds in the vast spectacle of collective life a mirror to the pattern it seeks to create.'<sup>31</sup> But Hassan does find a pattern as he outlines the creation of new categories of form: he focuses on nine particular works of fiction, which he divides in three existential categories based on the image of the hero; these three hero-patterns give birth to three different forms for the contemporary novel.<sup>32</sup> The last part of *Radical Innocence* becomes more specific, focusing on Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, J. D. Salinger and Saul Bellow as examples of the 'need to overcome the condition of recoil and seek a reconciliation between self and world'.<sup>33</sup> For Hassan, these writers come to typify an age and indicate literary advances that, in his later work, he defines as postmodern.

It is not until after *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (1967) that Hassan engages openly with the postmodern. In *The Literature of Silence*, he approaches

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<sup>29</sup> Hassan, *Radical Innocence*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>32</sup> In Part II of *Radical Innocence*, Hassan examines how different patterns are formed by the experience of the hero by analysing 9 novels and dividing them in 3 subclasses: 1) In William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), Harvey Swado's *Out Went the Candle* (1955) and Norma Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), the hero appears as *pharmakos* (a victim or scapegoat) and is ruled by necessity. This form is closed to development. 2) In Frederick Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying* (1949), Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the hero appears as *eiron* (self-deprecating), has little freedom and this form is suspended. 3) In Herbert Gold's *The Optimist* (1959), John Cheever's *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) and J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1958), the hero appears as *alazon* (a rebel), has considerable freedom and this form of fiction is open to development.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 203.

the works of Miller and Beckett as indicative of a literary wish for silence. Exhaustion and silence will feature as significant elements in Hassan's model of the postmodern, but here Hassan focuses on silence to propose Miller and Beckett as proponents of anti-literature. Hassan's anti-literature signifies an intensified self-consciousness and an inward look that verges on self-absorption. These 'silent' works of the authorial mind have consequences on the articulation and form of the novel, Hassan informs us, observing Beckett's and Miller's works and literary patterns.

Hassan's interest in the concept of silence continues in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*. Here, he remains preoccupied with the relation of the creative self to the changing world but Hassan's application of the Orphic model works to sustain both the ideas of introspection and transcendence *and* nature and the human body, simultaneously, rather than comparatively: 'The singing body of Orpheus holds [...] a contradiction – between the dumb unity of nature and the multiple voice of consciousness – that the song itself longs to overcome.'<sup>34</sup> It is this Orphic symbiosis that leads Hassan to draw on Hartman's *The Unmediated Vision*, in which the latter suggests that modernist writers struggle with a lack of mediation unknown to the Romantics (whose consciousness found expression in Nature). Hassan notes that 'nature and consciousness are seldom the same' and to Hartman's Wordsworth – whom Hartman proposes as one of the first modernists – he adds, amongst others, Sade and Blake. Hassan's concerns with artistic representation lead him to propose a pattern of two tendencies in literary language and form: the first one is expressive of an imagination that 'strains toward a kind of Dionysiac frenzy' that 'aspires to All'; the second, an imagination that moves 'toward abolition, and persuades art of its own impossibility' and 'aspires to Nothing'.<sup>35</sup> Hassan concludes that the 'two languages, taken far enough, dissolve

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<sup>34</sup> Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 6 and 7.

the Orphic pact between word and flesh.’<sup>36</sup> As the modern form dissolves within this movement between continuity and rupture, an echoing song and a deadening silence, postmodernism is born.

The negative boundary of this movement towards postmodernism, for Hassan, is silence. As he unravels the metaphoric use of the word to appropriate it to literature and criticism, it is tempting to deduce that Hassan’s model of postmodernism becomes a construction that collapses into destruction and despair: ‘We have crossed some invisible line; and stringless lyres now strum for a world without men. Postmodern literature moves, in nihilist play or mystic transcendence, towards a vanishing point.’<sup>37</sup> Yet, in Hassan’s Orphic model, postmodernism moves towards the Void by resisting nullity. Orpheus’s dismembered head still sings and his song echoes in the postmodern text. Hassan leads us through the darkness of Sade’s anti-form and anti-literature, the self-undermining aesthetics of the Dada movement and Hemmingway’s distrust of language, to Kafka’s exposition of ‘the disjunction of the modern sensibility’, or else, his desire for both communion and solitude.<sup>38</sup> Hassan makes his way through Sartre’s ontological ‘uneasiness with silence’ and Camus’s Absurd(ity), for his existential quest to reach the neutrality of Aliterature.<sup>39</sup> Aliterature, he informs us, is phenomenological and self-reflective: ‘Pretending to eschew ideology, protest, and analysis, it cultivates a certain flatness’, it ‘moves toward a still center, and within that toward a point yet more still.’<sup>40</sup> To move beyond Aliterature’s stillness, Hassan requires Genet’s transgressive or stealing hand and Beckett’s absurd comedy. It is via Beckett, who

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<sup>36</sup> Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Hassan argues that in Sade the ‘words we read turn back upon themselves; their form, repudiating an audience, becomes anti-form’, an anti-form that often reduces ‘fantasy to an equation’. He also suggests that Sade’s work is exemplary of anti-literature because it sets language against itself: ‘Sade’s language subverts itself, and suffers from the bad faith he shows toward his existent readers.’ On Hemmingway, Hassan proposes that his use of slang as a reaction against traditional modes of expression creates ‘a self-opposition, an anti-style’. Ibid. 39, 88-89 and 110.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 160.

pursues 'the vanishing point till it nearly vanishes' that Hassan traces a line towards the vanishing form that his *Postlude* attempts to bring into more focus.<sup>41</sup>

Doubtless, the evidence of postmodern literature is quarrelsome, abundant, various. The trends change rapidly and change again from place to place. Yet the two accents of silence, heard throughout this study, persist in postmodern literature: (a) the negative echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist; (b) its positive stillness, self-transcendent, sacramental, plenary.<sup>42</sup>

Hassan's 1982 addition to *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* ("Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism") appears as a revised attempt to reveal more of the postmodern form. Here, Hassan enlists a large and variable number of names that, despite their obvious differences, he associates with postmodernism, suggesting that the discourses of these figures form and rework the patterns of postmodernism.<sup>43</sup> Aware that his assortment can be viewed as crudely systematic, he declares that the 'critical concept of system is a "poor" poem of the intellectual imagination.'<sup>44</sup> Hassan's suspension between his recognition of the impossibility of a systematic approach to the concept of postmodernism and the wish for a unifying collective in the conceptualization of the postmodern, becomes evident not only in the list of the ten problems that he later relates to the idea of the postmodern, but perhaps more significantly, in his famous table of modernist and postmodern qualifications. The organization of the modern and postmodern elements in two columns encourages a more systematic approach to the postmodern. But that is exactly what Hassan wants to avoid when he concludes his table with the warning:

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<sup>41</sup> Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 210.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 248.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 260.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 261.

[T]he dichotomies this table represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse; concepts in any one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions, in both modernism and postmodernism, abound. Still, I would submit that rubrics in the right column point to the postmodern tendency, the tendency of indeterminance, and so may bring us closer to its historical and theoretical definition.<sup>45</sup>

Hassan's table closes in upon the determination of a postmodern model whilst acknowledging that such a task is destined to face us with the indeterminacies of language. Evoking Hartman, Hassan agrees with the former's assertion that 'contemporary criticism aims at the hermeneutics of indeterminacy' and questions whether the dismemberment of Orpheus is 'no more than the mind's need to make but one more construction of life's mutabilities and human mortality?'. He concludes his work with a question: 'And what construction lies beyond, behind, within, that construction?'<sup>46</sup>

Hassan's later work seeks to build a conceptual construction that works within the postmodern model. He turns to the nature of critical discourse and *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (1975) reworks his conceptualization of the postmodern with a self-critical style. In seven essays, *Paracriticisms* identifies specific problems in the texts and authors it addresses and suggests that it is the same problems that shape the critic's (and his own) discourse. The book develops a model of criticism that takes into account the subjectivity of the critic's voice. Paracriticism is discourse that stands 'outside' or 'beside' criticism and Hassan's concern with paracriticism expands to his next work, *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* (1980). *The Right Promethean Fire* is a collection of five essays and four journal entries that experiments with the paracritic

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<sup>45</sup> Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 269.

<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 41 and Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 271.

style, combining intellectual considerations with autobiographical accounts, the telling of stories and poems.

Hassan's next work, *Out of Egypt: Scenes and Arguments of an Autobiography* (1986), is autobiographical and signals the more self-reflexive and self-analytical mode that colours his later writings. Apart, perhaps, from the collection *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987), which consists of some of his major previous published essays on the postmodern, Hassan's later writings seems closely intertwined with his personal reflections on his journey as a literary critic. Even *Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters* (1990), where Hassan returns to textual analysis, can be considered as a testament to a more personal quest. *Selves at Risk* engages with texts and authors from American post-war fiction that are not canonical, to approach and explore the concept of quest, its motivations, and its effects on the literary form. Yet while Hassan questions the ideology of quest, exploring the motives of the figure of the seeker in his journey, he is also reflecting on his own academic quest. His declaration, 'I confess: my bias is for an independent critical stance', appears as a justification of his un-canonical critical stance with his work on paracriticism and postmodernism.<sup>47</sup> As he explains later in *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades* (1995),

[m]y writing offended most when it addressed postmodernism in paracritical form. The paracritical mode certainly was fallible, at its worst otiose, at its best a timely affront to orthodoxy; in any case, it was unrepeatable. Still, I wondered why critics who spoke of "decenterment" did little to decenter their work. I wondered why reviewers, intimate with every cultural vagary, tolerated no experiment in critical style.

I wondered why so many radical ideas, meant to revolutionize

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<sup>47</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 15.

consciousness and change the world, found only banal and clumsy expression. In the end, the issue was not criticism imitating art; it was critics seeking the full resonance of their voices, the scope of their languages and lives.<sup>48</sup>

The fifteen essays that compose *Rumors of Change* are divided in five parts that summarize Hassan's critical development. Hassan's selections reflect his evolving concerns: from early concerns about the subversion of style, to the development of the concept of postmodernism and paracriticism, his reflections on literary theory and culture, and the transgression of boundaries and borders in the world today. *Rumors of Change* is followed by another memoir, *Between the Eagle and the Sun: Traces of Japan* (1996) and then another collection of his most recent work with *In Quest of Nothing: Selected Essays, 1998-2008* (2010).

What becomes clear in Hassan's later work is his eagerness to reaffirm his independent stance in literary criticism. In an interview with Frank L. Cioffi, he goes further in questioning the impact of his work, declaring:

I think that I have marginalized myself, geographically and professionally - constitutionally, I am a loner. My independent stand (let's call it that) has been, paradoxically, more acceptable in Europe than in America. Why paradoxically? Because America, that old "willingness of the heart" as Scott Fitzgerald put it, has been most generous, most welcoming in every other way. I feel this strongly as a person, as an immigrant: I do not consider myself a hyphenated American.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Rumors of Change: Essays of Four Decades* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995) xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Frank L. Cioffi, "Postmodernism, Etc.: an Interview with Ihab Hassan." *Style*, 33.1 (1999): 357-371. Accessed: January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi\\_interview\\_ihab\\_hassan.htm](http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi_interview_ihab_hassan.htm).



Hassan's self-marginalization appears triggered by the reception his theory of the postmodern had in academic circles.<sup>50</sup> His main complaint is that critiques of his work focus on the dichotomies he raises between modernism and postmodernism (particularly with his table of vertical columns in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" from *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*) and ignore the caveat he provides warning that modernism and postmodernism are not to be thought of as separate entities and in a dialectic opposition to each other. His critics, Hassan complains, have also ignored 'earlier statements, going back to 1971, that Modernism does not suddenly cease so that Postmodernism may begin: they now coexist – in effect, I was saying that Postmodernism lies deeply within the body of Modernism (in "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography").'<sup>51</sup> Hassan's understanding of postmodernism as co-existing and continuing from modernism is at odds with his perception of his own work as discontinuous and conflicting with other postmodern critical discourse. His independent stand may, thus, appear paradoxical, considering the continuation that his postmodern theory suggests. Still, this paradox may be reflecting the postmodern nature of Hassan's critical contribution.

One of the literary critics that Hassan considers more constructive in her approach to his model of postmodernism is Linda Hutcheon. In the same interview with Cioffi referred to above, Hassan evaluates the critical responses to his table on modernism and postmodernism and declares: 'An English critic adopted an attitude of specious merriment toward the table. But Linda Hutcheon, more scrupulous, made a valid point in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: namely, that Postmodernism includes features from both columns, that its logic is less one of opposition (either/or) than of incorporation (both/and).'<sup>52</sup> Surprisingly, Hassan continues by

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<sup>50</sup> 'Charles Jencks or Linda Hutcheon or Hans Bertens will mention [my] work. Others - especially neo-Marxists - will have a very different attitude toward it, a magical or apotropaic attitude, as if to ward off a bad spell; or else they ignore it in audible silence.' Cioffi, "*Postmodernism, Etc.: an Interview with Ihab Hassan*." [http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi\\_interview\\_ihab\\_hassan.htm](http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi_interview_ihab_hassan.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

objecting to Hutcheon's observation: 'Fair enough. But so is the logic of Modernism, of Romanticism, of so much else' he argues.<sup>53</sup> It seems that Hassan's need for determination conflicts with the all-inclusive nature of postmodernism that his own work celebrates.

Hassan's complaint about Hutcheon's perception of his work is strange given that Hutcheon's work, like Hassan's, recognizes the tensions that shape the nature of the postmodern and resist easy formulation. In her chapter "Modelling the Postmodern: Parody and Politics" from *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) Hutcheon reveals her model for thinking about the postmodern: 'Postmodern architecture seems to me to be paradigmatic of our seeming urgent need, in both artistic theory and practice, to investigate the relation of ideology and power to all of our present discursive structures, and it is for this reason that I will be using it as my model throughout this study.'<sup>54</sup> Hutcheon's analogy and conceptualization of postmodernism in architectural terms echoes the nature of her previous work. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Hutcheon's concern was with narratives that expose their own patterns of construction by demanding the participation of the reader. Steering clear of the debates on the postmodern at that time, she limited her discussion to metafiction, an approach to narrative through particular techniques of self-analysis and self-consciousness. The model of Narcissus served Hutcheon to explore the ways in which the author engages the reader through self-exposition. Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative* indicates her motives and concerns: she is not interested in 'what is created' (defining the postmodern) but in 'how art is created' and this is why her work springs from textual analysis.<sup>55</sup>

Hutcheon's next project involves the construction of a model to explain the nature and effects of parody. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*

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<sup>53</sup> Cioffi, "Postmodernism, Etc.: an Interview with Ihab Hassan." [http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi\\_interview\\_ihab\\_hassan.htm](http://www.ihabhassan.com/cioffi_interview_ihab_hassan.htm).

<sup>54</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 36.

<sup>55</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), 8.

(1985) explores the ideology and paradoxical nature of parody, its relation to satire and its function in transgressing traditional forms of narration. Hutcheon's concern with metafiction and the transgressive nature of parody seem preparatory of her open engagement with postmodernism in 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* is an attempt to not simply describe the postmodern (as Hassan does, according to Hutcheon), but to place postmodernism within the dialectic opposition of theory and practice, dealing with both but subscribing to neither.<sup>56</sup> This is why Hutcheon approaches Hassan's table of modernist and postmodernist characteristics in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" as a display of interchangeable characteristics, rather than as designating dialectically the limits or characteristics of both. Still, Hutcheon's reading of Hassan's table in terms of incorporation (both/and), rather than differentiation triggered Hassan's objection. His apprehension was prompted by these comments from Hutcheon:

Ihab Hassan sees the oppositional paradox of postmodernism as lying in "its fanatic will to unmaking," on the one hand, and, on the other, "the need to discover a 'unitary' sensibility" (1982, 265). I see this paradox as less oppositional than provisional; I see it, instead, as an inscribing and undercutting of *both* any unitary sensibility *and* any disruptive will to unmake, for these are equally absolutist and totalizing concepts. Postmodernism is characterized by energy derived from the rethinking of the value of multiplicity and provisionality; in actual practice, it does not seem to be defined by any potentially paralyzing opposition between making and unmaking. [...] The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total

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<sup>56</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 15.

vision. It merely questions. If it *finds* such vision, it questions how, in fact, it made it.<sup>57</sup>

Hassan's attempts to resist ambiguity or possible nihilistic tendencies deriving from the all-inclusiveness of postmodern are undermined, according to Hutcheon, by the manner in which he projects his patterns. Hutcheon's 'and/both' is an attempt to emphasize postmodernism's hybrid nature as advocated, amongst others, by Hassan. His subsequent renunciation of Hutcheon's reading by drawing on similar literary tendencies in modernism and Romanticism may, then, be indicative of another postmodern tendency: to re-evaluate the past and the nature of history. Be that as it may, Hassan's response does not address Hutcheon's observations regarding his modern/postmodern model, which she interprets as 'a structure that implicitly denies the mixed, plural, and contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise.'<sup>58</sup> For Hutcheon, 'postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderline between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe'.<sup>59</sup> This process of interrogation is at the heart of the nature of the postmodern for Hutcheon who refuses to 'consider postmodernism in evaluating terms (the decline or the salvation of contemporary art)'.<sup>60</sup>

Hutcheon's later work moves to explore the political nature of postmodernism. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) she suggests that the representation of postmodern art 'cannot but be political': 'As producers or receivers of postmodern art we are all implicated in the legitimization of our culture' she argues, and *The Politics of Postmodernism* sets out to clarify the ambiguities surrounding the political nature of the postmodern.<sup>61</sup> The tensions that Hutcheon unravels regard the political tensions that arise from the postmodern challenging of

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<sup>57</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>61</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 3, 15.

representations of the past: 'In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation' and so to challenge the representations of the past is political.<sup>62</sup> Hutcheon also explores the politics of parody, as foregrounding the power struggles in representation, and looks not only into fiction but also cinema and photography to conclude: Postmodernism 'is neither neoconservatively nostalgic nor radically revolutionary; it is unavoidably compromised – and it knows it.'<sup>63</sup>

Hutcheon's more recent work focuses on contemporary Canadian fiction and themes of irony, opera and adaptation, without ever abandoning the postmodern concern. It is through the analysis of different art forms, modes and works of fiction that Hutcheon moves to construct a model of postmodernism. But while Hutcheon's postmodernism always appears to be grounded on the artifice, Hassan's later interests move from the self (and autobiography) toward the spirituality of the postmodern. Still, looking back and as early as the publication of *Radical Innocence*, one can detect traces of Hassan's quest for a vanishing form.

[A] critique of the novel must ultimately seek the elusive boundaries between art and action, imagination and fact, order and disorder, the boundaries, that is, at which one form of human awareness blends into another. A critique of fiction is a criticism of dreams that have taken form, yearnings and denials that have taken shape. This is not a time for professors of literature to ignore the judgement of human passions. (326)

These closing remarks from *Radical Innocence* reaffirm the human nature of the literary critic at times when critical debates surrounding the postmodern were growing vigorously.

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<sup>62</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 115.

## **1.2. *HiStory*: Hartman Revisited.**

Having introduced various issues relating to the postmodern and then detailed the development of its conceptualization in the work of Hassan and Hutcheon, I would like to bring Hartman into the discussion by first examining related theoretical influences and critical developments that have emerged and continue to co-exist alongside the postmodern. This involves thinking historically and considering debates that surround and infiltrate the perimeters of postmodern theory. If the historiography of the postmodern remains debatable and unable to identify a historical point for the advance of the postmodern, then perhaps parallel critical developments to that of postmodernism can illuminate aspects of its nature. In literary criticism, the parallel progression of poststructuralism seems closely entwined with the postmodern. This section begins by reflecting on the advance of poststructuralism and attempts to illuminate the critical influence of deconstruction on postmodern literary criticism, with specific reference to Hartman.

One of the key figures within what became known as ‘The Yale School of Deconstruction’ is Geoffrey H. Hartman. Yet, as I will argue in this section, Hartman’s association with poststructuralism is generic and problematic. Over the last two generations, Hartman has written on a wide range of subjects, returning always in some way to the poetry of William Wordsworth, which remains one of his primary interests. Today, Hartman holds the position of Sterling Professor Emeritus & Senior Research Scholar of English and Comparative Literature at Yale University. His critical contributions include the founding of the Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, while his work continues to explore issues of poetics and re-examine the role of critical commentary today. Although a founding member of the theoretical school of poststructuralism, Hartman’s position develops variations and differentiations to the poststructuralist debate that remain underexplored. This section will explore the development of Hartman’s criticism in order to examine his diversion(s)

from poststructuralism and establish that Hartman's critical interventions are paramount in thinking about postmodernism and the future of the literary text.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the critical reception of poststructuralism was not particularly favourable. Its inception, from what came to be known as 'The Yale School', was met not with just a critical hesitation but often, with polemical attacks. 'The Yale School' referred to five prominent literary thinkers: Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Hartman, who were colleagues at Yale University at that time.<sup>64</sup> The five became the centre of theoretical controversy and despite their diverse and often conflicting positions on poststructuralism and deconstruction, they acquired the high profile trademark of the 'Hermeneutical Mafia', a label linked by William H. Pritchard's article "The Hermeneutical Mafia: After Strange Gods at Yale". Pritchard denounced 'The Yale School', focusing particularly on Bloom and Hartman.<sup>65</sup> His anxieties and objections to 'The Yale School' centred on the idea of deconstruction, a 'method' of reading that reveals the internal oppositions that underline the language of a text. Edward Said attacked Derrida in his essay "An Exchange on Deconstruction and History", arguing that deconstruction 'cannot be done endlessly on the level of theory, or at least, of theory pretending to be theory' and suggesting that Derrida's work develops with 'power relations' in mind and as a theory that aims 'to recapture all other theories'.<sup>66</sup> Along with Derrida, Hartman was also attacked, by Martin Wallace in his response to Hartman's "Literary Criticism and its Discontents". Wallace denounces Hartman's critical style and his concern with deconstruction, interpreting them as manipulating and aiming to stage and dramatize differentiations between him and

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<sup>64</sup> While teaching at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, Derrida was closely affiliated with Yale University from 1965 to 1984. In 1986 he started teaching at the University of California, Irvine.

<sup>65</sup> William H. Pritchard, "The Hermeneutical Mafia: After Strange Gods at Yale", *The Hudson Review*, 28. 4 (1975-1976): 601-610.

<sup>66</sup> Said, Edward, M.-R. Logan, Eugenio Donato, et al. "An Exchange on Deconstruction and History." *boundary* 2, 8.1 (1979): 65-74, (67-8).

other critics (including ‘The Yale School’ critics).<sup>67</sup> Wallace suggests that ‘the drama [Hartman] enacts would not be *true* if it did not involve gaps, contradictions, retrenchments, blockages, leaps, and aporias’ accusing Hartman of staging deconstructive gaps in order to find his critical voice and establish an esteemed position in literary criticism.<sup>68</sup> The poststructuralism that Hartman represents, for Wallace and other critics, suggests an infinite play of signification that serves ulterior (academic) motives. These kind of critical responses appear to reflect a community’s anxiety about the change signalled by poststructuralism and ‘The Yale Critics’. The anxiety is blind to the theoretical and philosophical questions that emerge with deconstruction. Ironically, as I will show later, it was left to the ‘poststructuralists’ to write against poststructuralism and deconstruction, in a more incisive manner.

At the heart of his response to Wallace’s essay, Hartman raises the question of what kind of knowledge enables or disables literary understanding. Hartman questions Wallace’s celebration of practical criticism and suggests that it subordinates theory, implying it as impractical or even, irrelevant. These two points are characteristic of Hartman’s position in literary criticism: for Hartman, theory is approached as a part of the web of the literary text, and reading or interpretation should not be predetermined or preconditioned by seeking to acquire specific knowledge. Hartman and Derrida approach the language of the text in both philosophical and linguistic terms but, as Douglas Atkins suggests, ‘Hartman writes from *within* deconstruction but without being *of* it.’<sup>69</sup> That means that Hartman places himself closer to Bloom’s critical approach, since both have often written against deconstruction.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, for Bloom and Hartman, as Atkins rightly observes, reading ‘leads to the

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<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey Hartman “Literary Criticism and its Discontents”, *Critical Inquiry*, 3.2, (1976): 203-20

<sup>68</sup> Martin Wallace, “Literary Critics and Their Discontents: A Response to Geoffrey Hartman”, *Critical Inquiry*, 4. 2 (1977): 397-406, (405).

<sup>69</sup> Douglas Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style* (London: Routledge, 1990), 23.

<sup>70</sup> Harold Bloom ed. *Deconstruction and Criticism: Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller* (London: Continuum, 2004).



counterfabrication of writing, just as writing involves a “misreading” of prior writers. We cannot gain real insight into an artist or ourselves by pure contemplation, only by the contemplation that making (*poesis*) enables.’<sup>71</sup> Understanding a text involves creating a text and, for Hartman, *poesis* at its best is poetical.<sup>72</sup>

In his relation to the Yale School, it is in the creative practise of reading and writing that Hartman finds that his position differs from Bloom’s. Hartman argues that in Bloom’s work poetry comes to mean *too* much and that, as Atkins summarizes, Bloom ‘*accuses* poetry in order to save it’.<sup>73</sup> Miller’s approach to poetry and the literary text appears less adversarial than Bloom’s. In his essay “The Critic as a Host”, Miller explores the idea of intertextuality, examining citations as parasitical to the primary text, in order to argue that interpretation, the voice that comes to complement or grow out of the primary text, is not the original poem’s virus. For Miller, the various interpretations and readings that a poem invites are a part of its different layers of meaning. In that sense, Miller argues, there is no escape from tradition or history. De Man, on the other hand, appears less engaged with this idea of historicity in regards to the text. Hartman argues that de Man’s position appears absolute and, at the same time, unaccountable, since his deconstruction lacks historical context.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, de Man’s writings differ from Derrida’s. De Man argues that his starting point ‘is not philosophical but basically philological and for that reason didactical, text-orientated. Therefore’, he argues,

I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger,  
I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working  
hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that  
the text knows in an absolute way what it’s doing. [...] In a complicated

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<sup>71</sup> Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 53.

<sup>72</sup> *Poesis* (Ancient Greek ποιησις) translates as production, composition. A derivative of *poesis* is poetry.

<sup>73</sup> Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 60-1.

<sup>74</sup> Consider Gadamer: ‘*Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event*’ and ‘*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.*’ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300 and 302.

way, I would hold to that statement that “the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive” rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text. The difference is that Derrida’s text is so brilliant, so incisive, so strong that whatever happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. He doesn’t need [...] anybody else; I do need them very badly because *I* never had an idea of my own, it was always through a text, through the critical examination of a text... I am a philologist and not a philosopher: I guess there is a difference there...<sup>75</sup>

If de Man is a philologist and Derrida a philosopher, then it is Miller that bridges the gap between de Man’s rhetoric and Derrida’s difference. Still, Hartman’s position differs from that of Miller, de Man or Derrida: these ‘boa-deconstructors’ pursue the deconstruction of the text with a philosophical or rhetorical pathos.<sup>76</sup> ‘My interests’ Hartman suggests, ‘are predominantly in the study of poetry and issues of interpretation. But I suspect I am at heart an *essayist* always finding something of basic human and social interest.’<sup>77</sup> Of course, Hartman is not just an essayist in the conventional sense. The critical tensions that formulate the background of his critical contribution may alone attest to that.

Moving away from his relation to the Yale School, Hartman’s work presents a challenge in its extensive range, which expands from poetry to philosophical concerns. Hartman’s first publication, *The Unmediated Vision* (1954), sought to find a method for the interpretation of poetry and develop a theory of poetry. Here, Hartman examines the poet’s struggle to achieve unmediation in representation, to argue that the artist’s ‘real mediation is to accept and live the lack of mediation’ and the arbitrariness of language.<sup>78</sup> His concern on issues of representation reaches modernism in *André Malraux* (1960), where he explores the

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<sup>75</sup> Stephano Rosso, “An Interview with Paul de Man”, *Critical Inquiry*, 12.4. (1986): 788-795, (791).

<sup>76</sup> Bloom, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ix.

<sup>77</sup> My italics, <http://english.yale.edu/faculty-staff/geoffrey-hartman>

<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 173.

abandonment of representation as the aim of the modernist artist. In *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (1964) he returns to the issue of poetry's relation to representation, to argue that Wordsworth is not just a nature poet, but one of the first modernists: 'Wordsworth thought nature itself lead him beyond nature,' he argues, but beyond nature the poet finds only himself and so, 'Wordsworth is of the mind's party without knowing it' concludes Hartman.<sup>79</sup> After editing a collection on Hopkins in *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1966), which approaches the poet as exemplary of modernist poetry, Hartman turned to more theoretical concerns. *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970*, (1970) is a collection of Hartman's essays on Camus, Maurice Blanchot, Blake, Marvell, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Northrop Frye and Virginia Woolf, among others. Here, Hartman explores the position of poetry, the theory of structuralism, and in his compelling essay "Toward Literary History", he proposes a new theory of form, a mixture of forms inspired by Milton's *Arcade* and the importance of *genius loci* in today's universalism. The collection also includes Hartman's essay "Beyond Formalism", where he begins to explore the relation of the formal parts to the aesthetic content of art. Here, Hartman moves beyond attempting to identify one or the other; he challenges 'pointed' criticism and advocates 'listening' to the text. *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (1972) proceeds from this understanding of criticism as an activity, rather than a system. Here, Hartman collects some essays from other major critics, such as Harold Bloom ("Coleridge: The Anxiety of Influence") and John Hollander ("Wordsworth and the Music of Sound"), that were presented at the English Institute to celebrate its first thirty years. A year later, together with David Thorburn, Hartman edited another collection of critical writings, *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities*, which focuses on French and American

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<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 33 and 184.

Romantic poetry and novels to establish the critic as a pivotal figure in the process of regenerating the literary text.

Hartman's concerns about the role of criticism in the two earlier collections he edited and in his work in *Beyond Formalism* are further explored in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (1975). *The Fate of Reading* is another collection of Hartman's essays which address the changes in the interpretative canon and the style of criticism. Here, Hartman's essays examine the relation of interpretation to historical consciousness and the discipline of literary history and explore their impact on art and critical style. It is through those concerns with the science of history that Hartman progresses in developing the idea of *psychoaesthetics*, the marriage of the science of psychoanalysis and aesthetics, for the interpretation of the text. Later, in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text* (1978), Hartman compiles critical writings of various authors on Freud and psychoanalysis to promote psychoanalytic criticism as a mode of close reading (rather than scientific discourse). In the same year, Hartman published *Akiba's Children*, a collection of poetry that may be perceived as Hartman's return to poetry or his exposition of his own writings for psychoanalytic interpretation. But in being a collection of poetry, *Akiba's Children* is a landmark in Hartman's development as an essayist for another reason. From here on, the early concerns on issues of representation, mediation, poetry, literary history, psychoaesthetics, form and the nature and role of criticism will be revisited, revised and explored continuously and in greater depth, by Hartman himself.

*Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (1980) begins with some self-reflective comments on his understanding of the nature and position of modern criticism. Hartman argues for a dialogic exchange between the artist and critic, which appears relevant to his own vacillation between writing poetry and the writing of essays.

[S]peaking with each other – and on a more than didactic level – has always been the distinguishing feature of life in society. Art, in conjunction with criticism is not a luxury but is essential to communicate in a human way. That I am incurably didactic may be as brute a fact as having a will or desire that life cannot satisfy; but what I do with that communication-compulsion, or what it does to me, is the issue. Life is not an academy, still less a military academy; instruction has to find a way to become art, a pleasurable and responsive activity, “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge” (Wordsworth).<sup>80</sup>

Recognizing that he may be perceived as didactic, Hartman calls for a mixed style in criticism, that is both creative and critical. In this, he is both defending and naturalizing his own complex style of writing, which merges lyrical and specialist language. But, more significantly, Hartman presents us with a reinvented criticism that is not fearful of influence and can survive the ‘contamination’ postmodernism suggests. Hartman rejects the status of criticism as subordinate to the critical text, proposing that scrutiny, exploration, understanding and rethought (the requirements of critical writing) are inherently creative activities. To relate to artistic sensitivities, the critic is required to be artistically sensitive himself. Hartman’s concern with the tendency to convert critical thought to facts, rather than art, continues in *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (1981). Here, Hartman finds a paradigmatic text for his vision of creative criticism, which allows him to move on and demonstrate how to respond to creative criticism, creatively. Derrida’s *Glas*, offers the opportunity for Hartman to revise his attempts to formulate a theory of reading in *The Unmediated Vision*, by exploring the dialogic and intertextual qualities of (Derrida’s, or better, Hegel’s and Genet’s) writing. With *Glas* as his reference point, Hartman manages to

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<sup>80</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 2.

develop two issues: firstly, to revise his call for creative writing, specifying that it does not require the facilitation a 'common reader' – a concern he will return to in *Minor Prophecies: The literary Essay in the Culture Wars* (1991) and in his later work on the 'friendship style' of criticism – and secondly, to read a text that resists reading, through its focus on *écriture* and writing. Hartman finds that, despite its focus on writing and the challenge of the book's textuality, which presents two columns (Genet's and Hegel's), *Glas* 'discloses an echo rather than an image'.<sup>81</sup> Hartman follows those echoes of meaning to develop his idea of *closer* reading.

Hartman's idea of closer reading implies the close attention to the language of the text. Yet, Hartman is aware that his idea of closer reading can be misinterpreted for a technique, rather than a mode of a process of reading. *Easy Pieces* (1985) is another collection of essays that expands the scope of what Hartman reads (from Blake to French fiction and cinematography, Borges, Hitchcock as well as essays on the Humanities, the style of contemporary criticism and the impact of deconstruction on education). By expanding the range of his interpretative approach Hartman expands the notion of close reading: close reading is not a myopic focus on the gaps or language of the text but a reading through the text to other texts and stories. *Midrash and Literature* (1986) seeks to develop an understanding of midrash, a method of Jewish commentary, hermeneutics and intertextuality as modes of interpretation. For Hartman, midrash opens up interpretation because the midrashic text dissolves divisions between primary and secondary text. It is then very appropriate that the collection Hartman edits is an assortment of essays from leading literary critics (Frank Kermode, Harold Fisch and Jacques Derrida, among others); although composed by very distinct and distinctive literary critics, Hartman's topic of reading and

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<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), xxii.

interpretation accommodates a midrashic mixture of the critical expositions these essays address.

*The Longest Shadow* (1996) inaugurates a closer look at cultural critique and focuses on a reading of an event that continues to haunt contemporary consciousness. Here, Hartman collects his essays on the Holocaust, which examine a variety of modes that the aftershocks of the Holocaust take, in order to explore the limitations of language in the representation of trauma. The collection addresses issues of identity, memory and the role of forgetfulness in the communication of the Holocaust, while each chapter deals with a particular mode of testimony, narration or representation of it (from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* to the collection of the Holocaust survivor video testimonies and Hartman's own personal memories of his evacuation from Germany as a child). Through its exploration of trauma, *The Longest Shadow* suggests that representation necessitates or consists of limitations. Still, as Hartman insists in *The Fateful Question of Culture* (1997), language triggers the imagination and imagination is always the way to reconnect with the world. Language and literature appears as the placeholder of imagination and *The Fateful Question of Culture* seeks to restore the significance of art in contemporary culture, despite its struggle with representation. Taking into consideration the fragmentation and abstraction of the postmodern condition, Hartman draws on a great variety of texts, from philosophy to popular culture, to examine how and why art and criticism are significant today. Hartman argues that contemporary culture is not just reactionary to politics, ideology or postmodern ambiguity but a dialogic exchange. Literature captures, he suggests,

elegiac themes as the loss of the organic community, or the loss of totality, or the mutilation and reification of human relations in modern (capitalistic, industrial, modern, postmodern) society in a way that is not predetermined by a casuistic ideology or causal system. Art is neither didactic nor

pedagogical, except by fits and starts. Whatever its purposes may be – and they do not exclude the expression of strong beliefs – it does not strive for a univocal solution, catechism, or definitive means-end relation.<sup>82</sup>

Hartman is careful in his discrimination and separation of literature from other systems (of politics, society, culture or epochs). The dangers are, as he warns in *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (2004), on the one hand, the attachment of art and language to a transcendent, spiritual order, and on the other, the pursue of an impossible authenticity. ‘Many have claimed that something read, even as fragmented as a single sentence come upon by chance, has made a radical difference and set them on a new course with spiritual implications’ he observes and concedes: ‘Myself, I have never graduated beyond Fortune Cookies’.<sup>83</sup> What Hartman could ‘read in’ a fortune cookie could be fascinating for many readers of his work; but Hartman’s comical remark becomes more serious if we consider that here Hartman relates the attentiveness of some reading to the promise of revelation. Still Hartman does not want ‘to become a Mr. Smooth-it-away’, as he confesses, and notes that he is wary of this desolating contemporary tendency.<sup>84</sup> Drawing on Gianni Vattimo, he suggests that in the postmodern condition we have demystified religion among other systems and that now the temptation is to replace them with the ‘dream of total communication’, the belief that language is as facilitating, communicative and reliable as a system.<sup>85</sup> Of course, the need for communication remains but Hartman wants to sustain the mutability of the word as enabling and intrinsic to creativity and the enchantment of language.

In 2007 Hartman published the autobiographical book *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*. However, like a child’s account that issues more from the effect rather than the detailing of action, Hartman’s memory fails to render the

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<sup>82</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 63.

<sup>83</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 122 and 123.

<sup>84</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 125.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 145.



details and actualities of his life. *A Scholar's Tale* concentrates instead on Hartman's intellectual progression, which does not hold to a linear development or the transmission of personal information. It is Hartman's mind that Hartman attempts to map here and it is without nostalgia but from the vantage point of maturity that he looks at his past. Perhaps then, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (2011), his most recent publication, can be approached as part of Hartman's introspective look and as seeking to trace and examine the roots of his own tabulation or critical tendencies. The book's two pillars are the Ancient Greek Classics and Christianity; in between Hartman places the Jewish tradition. In this, *The Third Pillar* is erected as an inscription, the memorial post of his own freestanding position but also as a beam that seeks to illuminate Hartman's continuing concerns: the Bible, midrash and education.<sup>86</sup> *The Third Pillar* demonstrates how these three concerns interact with the present and future of contemporary literary criticism.

Hartman's critical work is mainly characterized by collections of essays. This is, of course, because he is content with the role of the *essayist*, rather than the perhaps more grand role of the literary critic or philosopher. Hartman's style thrives in a fast-moving mode (in the shortness of the essay) that is as intense and intensive as poetry. 'I feel poor or *désœuvré* whenever I am more of a consumer than a producer,' Hartman confesses.<sup>87</sup> For Hartman, the two notions (the 'producer' and essayist) become almost tautological. Hartman approaches reading and interpretation as productive rather than passive and this 'productivity' is manifested through the process of essay writing. In his work, it is this correlation of the literary critic and the 'producer' that has challenged Hartman's commentators. The creativity that the figure of the producer implies for the interpreter places a lot of significance on the process of reading, and by placing a lot of responsibility on the reader Hartman challenges

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<sup>86</sup> In the three parts of *The Third Pillar*, the part on midrash is the middle part, placed in the in-between and corresponding to the inbetweenness of Judaism, which comes, as Hartman argues, in the interception of Christianity (the Bible) and education (Ancient Greek philosophy).

<sup>87</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 217.

(unwittingly or not) the reading of his own essays. Together with his unquestionably lyrical, protean and arresting style, this preconditioning or demand on the reading of his criticism becomes disarming. In *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*, a celebrated and concise collection that celebrates Hartman's literary contribution, Daniel T. O'Hara sees Hartman as the future of criticism in literary studies.<sup>88</sup> Douglas G. Atkins, on the other hand, recognizes that Hartman's placement of responsibility on individual readers requires any response to be 'a revitalized, responsible *criticism*' since all essays should aim to be, according to Hartman, 'responsive and responsible'.<sup>89</sup> That requires an interpretation that is not simply relational; making association is unproductive or critically unprogressive. So Atkins tries hard not to be relational:

No doubt in my own *prosaic* account I have *straightened out* Hartman's thinking, zealously obscuring the relational as I have sought to make clear the directional. Still, by providing so many of Hartman's own words, I hope to have suggested the difference of his work from simple linear development (*and* accommodation) as well as the implied resistance to easy appropriation. The thinking Hartman inspires entails circling about a topic, following him as he relates issues and returns, bee-like, always attentive to resonances, to previous points made, which are never completely forgotten, without ever coming to rest in anything like a thesis-statement (his essays thus body forth *desire*).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> O'Hara sees Hartman as the 'modern critical exemplar of aesthetic education as an imaginative *Bildung*'. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara eds. *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>89</sup> Atkins G. Douglas, *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style* (London: Routledge, 1990), 12. This is the third book of what Atkins calls in his introduction a trilogy on 'writing of Hartman' (xiv). The other two are *Quest of Difference: Reading Pope's Poems* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986) and *Reading Deconstruction / Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

<sup>90</sup> Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 118.

In avoiding the relational in Hartman's discourse, Atkins becomes relational (networked or webbed in) only to Hartman. This is reflected on his prose which relies heavily on Hartman's articulation of critical perspectives. Atkins becomes difficult to follow because of what he recognizes in his work: his heavy use of quotations from Hartman. Even more, Atkins becomes unable to escape Hartman's prose in another way: in keeping faithful to and echoing Hartman's poetic language and style.<sup>91</sup> Atkins's prose lacks the authority it requires to carry out what it intends – namely the mapping of Hartman's critical influences and concerns. As a result, Atkins becomes difficult to follow. And Atkins seems to be aware of this complexity in his project, when he admits that '[i]t is, of course, relation that I have been discussing'.<sup>92</sup>

Atkins reveals not only that it is challenging to distinguish the relational in Hartman's work but also the difficulty of relating to it. Vincent B. Leitch meets the same challenges but examines them from another perspective. He notes that Hartman admits that he sometimes writes against deconstruction.<sup>93</sup> This leads him to suggest that Hartman practises metacriticism, the criticism of criticism or critical writing that examines the process of writing criticism. Leitch grounds this claim on Hartman's critique of the critical world:

Hartman senses two extreme tendencies in modern criticism. On the one hand, the work of the *scholar-critic* tends to restrict itself to the scrupulous elucidation of particular texts. It defines literature in reductive formal terms and limits its work to narrow fields of specialization. [...] Inevitably, this criticism overvalues the literary work as a miracle of universal truth. On the

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<sup>91</sup> But Atkins does make some interesting observations on Hartman's style: Atkins wants to show that Hartman's contribution is affected by Romanticism (suggesting that he is 'unsure' of what the reading of the Romantics taught Hartman and rather that it 'confirmed – and nurtured – feelings, perspectives and concerns he had in common with them') and Judaism (linking Hartman's intertextual writing with Jewish writing). Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 58.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>93</sup> Leitch observes that Hartman realizes that *Glas* is 'the moment when deconstruction turns on criticism and deconstructs its limits and its substance.' Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 210.

other hand, the work of the *philosopher-critic* regards the literary text as a moment on the way to absolute thinking or higher knowledge.<sup>94</sup>

Leitch's illuminating observation on Hartman's critique of modern criticism may be applied to Hartman's work. Hartman is in danger of being either overvalued (*scholar-critic* approach) or undervalued (*philosopher-critic* approach). In this sense, Leitch's consideration of Hartman's work as metacritical may be regarded as scholarly. But Leitch's classification of Hartman's work as metacriticism implies that Hartman is directly revealing in his works the ways in which his mind works. That is far from what Hartman's style displays, with its use of metaphorical language and lyricism.

Tributes to Hartman's work highlight a key difficulty in critical interventions to his theoretical approaches: Hartman not only resists dialectic oppositions, which presents a difficulty for differentiating from his thinking, but is constantly re-evaluating, revisiting and re-inventing his positions, making it particularly challenging to assert his theoretical movements. Hartman's style thrives on evasion and commentary on his work requires both a historical tracing of his revisions and a thematic outlining of his approach. Pieter Vermeulen attempts to deal with both of these complexities in *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism after the Holocaust*, a book that re-engages Hartman in the tensions between the nostalgia for a lost order and the embrace of the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterizes the postmodern condition. Like Atkins, Vermeulen maps Hartman's reorientations throughout the nearly sixty years of his theoretical development but he attempts a more systematic approach to Hartman's work. He examines Hartman's revision of his theory of modern poetry, from *The Unmediated Vision*'s initial celebration of poetry's capacity to escape historical and linguistic limitations in mediating an experience of reality, to 'relocating literary significance within historical time' and the acknowledgment of a need for a more emphatic approach of the

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<sup>94</sup> Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, 226.

real.<sup>95</sup> Vermeulen suggests that this shift leads Hartman to address his concern on poetry's marginalization today and affirm poetry's significant role as 'both the object and the exemplar of criticism'.<sup>96</sup> Parallel to this development, Vermeulen observes a reversal in Hartman's work: from the earlier suggestion of poetry as the placeholder of knowledge, poetry's survival becomes vital as 'the placeholder of loss'.<sup>97</sup> Vermeulen argues that for Hartman, poetry demonstrates 'the continuing viability of experiences of loss'.<sup>98</sup> Drawing on Alan Liu's description of contemporary cultural anxiety as 'the fear of the loss of loss' Vermeulen suggests that Hartman's affirmation of loss in his defence of poetry is a response to a culture of ambiguity and the phenomenon of postmodernism.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, he claims that Hartman wants to use the medium of poetry to 'formulate a cure' for contemporary culture and preserve the possibility of experience and 'the memory of literature alive'.<sup>100</sup> Yet in this, Vermeulen completely disregards Hartman's warnings against *nosological* readings in *The Fate of Reading*, where he expresses a major concern in his criticism: Hartman maintains that interpretative acts that seek to identify the text's maladies reduce interpretation, transposing it as *nosology*. It seems that Vermeulen's systematic response to Hartman attempts to do what it identifies in Hartman's work: address 'the fear of the loss of loss' of Hartman's theoretical contribution.

In his conclusion, Vermeulen notes that Hartman's positioning of literature as 'the privileged placeholder of the connection between mind and things' is threatened by his 'more encompassing concern for phenomenal reality, while it is in the name of such a concern that literature is being privileged'.<sup>101</sup> A similar difficulty can be identified in Vermeulen's treatment of Hartman: Hartman's exceptional contribution threatens to go at the expense of a

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<sup>95</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism after the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2010), 8.

<sup>96</sup> Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 47.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 70 and 126.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 131.

more encompassing analysis, while it is in the name of that analysis that Hartman is honoured. What becomes obvious through not only Vermeulen but also Hartman's other commentators is that Hartman's work resists categorization and systematization. But what most of his critics ignore, or divert from, is what is central in Hartman's discourse: for Hartman, everything begins with the reading of the text. While Atkins echoes Hartman's discourse, Vermeulen orphans him from the literary work that he reads (or reads through). To separate Hartman from his reading of the text is to reduce, in some way, the scope of his intellectual thought and present his critical contribution as paramorphous.

During a discussion with Hartman in Yale in June 2011, he confessed and complained that recent reviews of his work make him 'sound difficult'. It seems that Hartman does not fully recognize the innovative complexity of his critical contribution. Still, it is challenging, as his commentators relay, to write *post* Hartman: Atkins admits that he writes *of* him; Vermeulen seems to be writing about him. The task of the elucidation of Hartman's work appears impossible. It seems that Hartman demands a certain co-operation from his reader, a dialogic exchange that depends on an 'other'. This thesis embarks on such a dialogic interaction and against Hartman's mutability it posits postmodernism's volatility.

Despite his objections, Hartman *is* difficult to read because his readings lack a destination and offer no solutions. At the same time his style appears conservative but also amicable, prophetic and yet familiar. Hartman's evasive critical style resembles postmodernism's obscurity in resisting a methodological approach, but as with his previous commentators, I will attempt to address Hartman's (and postmodernism's) changeability as the reason for further investigation and not as an excuse for the avoidance of his critical contribution. Indeed, this lack of methodology in the artistic or critical work may invite more readings and enrich interpretation; the lack of a system may be a fertile hermeneutical ground, rather than a wasteland.

### 1.3. Reading the Postmodern Text: An Analysis.

In “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’” Lyotard suggests that the ‘post-’ of postmodernism is not ‘a movement of repetition but a procedure in “ana-”: a procedure of analysis, analogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an “initial forgetting”.’<sup>102</sup> Central to Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern is an intrinsic anadiplosis of this forgetting: the forgetting of history, tradition and the grand fictions of the past. As Hartman explains, Lyotard ‘does not deny that there is a collective memory marked by solacing fictions, political myths and the “grant récit,” but he defines the postmodern condition in part as the demise of their legitimating power.’<sup>103</sup> While Lyotard’s postmodern theory rejects the legitimacy or power of memory, for Hartman, memory can be more haunting and disabling and forgetting, historically perilous.<sup>104</sup> Still, by drawing on Nietzsche, Hartman acknowledges that life is impossible without forgetfulness.<sup>105</sup> He recognizes that ‘[s]ome distortion is inherent in every attempt to achieve stability or closure, as history changes into memory and its institutionalization.’<sup>106</sup> For Hartman, a certain forgetting (loss) is necessary in interpretation and in sanctioning the enduring weight of history and tradition. In following Hartman, this analysis of his critical contribution since 1954, may inevitably appear as if it is ‘forgetting’ certain aspects of Hartman’s theoretical developments while concentrating more on others. Indeed, this thesis will not attempt to directly examine the particulars of Hartman’s theory of modern poetry, psychoaesthetics or his theory of trauma. Moreover, I do not address issues that have distinguished Hartman in the academic world to this day: his discourse on the Romantics and Wordsworth, and his analysis of the Holocaust. However, by not attempting to focus on or distil an accurate picture of what Hartman’s critique reveals on these two issues, I hope to prove that

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<sup>102</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, 93.

<sup>103</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 6.

<sup>104</sup> See Hartman, *The Longest Shadow*.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 39.

Hartman's invaluable critical contribution is irreplaceable because of something more substantial that characterizes *all* of his critical approaches. Central to Hartman's discourse is his idea and application of close reading.

In his writings, Hartman does not so much produce new theories; it is his revisions and innovative re-readings of familiar and not so familiar concepts and texts that posit Hartman as indispensable in literary studies. For the same reason, it is difficult to write after Hartman. In keeping specific texts in mind, Hartman's philosophical thinking is interwoven with his hermeneutics. I will attempt to deal with that challenge Hartman presents by switching Hartman's reference points and substituting the texts he is reading, in order to examine whether his approach and idea of close reading can be useful in the interpretation of postmodern literature.

The chapters that follow introduce distinctive postmodern texts that have elicited minimal critical responses. Each chapter attempts to address a specific difficulty that faces their interpretation, offering analytical close ups that aspire to produce new ways of thinking about the postmodern novel. This methodology is line with what Hartman understands to be the truly critical.

The critical essay today, to qualify as such, must contain some close-ups: it tends to proceed, in fact, by shifts of perspective (as in some kinds of sequential art or concrete poetry) that expose the non-homogeneity of the fact at hand, the arbitrariness of the knots that bind the work into a semblance of unity. The close-ups are not there merely to illustrate or reinforce a suppositious unity but to show what simplifications, or



institutional processes, are necessary for achieving any kind of unitary, consensual view of the artefact.<sup>107</sup>

Hartman's description of the essay as a close up facilitates the advance of his idea of close reading. Hartman wants to re-engage critical attention with the interpretation of particular texts but, at the same time, he remains wary of the consequences of this move. On the one hand, he notes a critical tendency to seek out literature as the exemplification of theoretical concerns; on the other, he is concerned about the after-effects of the postmodern demand for the centralization of a superfluous variety of marginalized texts. In *Minor Prophecies* he explains his interpretative position in more depth:

It must be clear by now that I have a personal difficulty with assertions that rely on names and summaries rather than on specific source-texts accompanied by close reading – a difficulty even greater when it comes to cultural history and drawing lessons from it. Yet I know what troubles me: I do not want to read in order to find illustrations for an argument or thesis, to appropriate texts that way. Reading literature is for me a deliberate *blinding*. I stumble about, sometimes hedonistically, in that word-world; I let myself be ambushed by sense or sensation and forget the drive toward a single, all-conquering truth; and I unravel the text only as it is simultaneously rethreaded on the spool of commentary. Perhaps this snail-horn text-perception is a symptomatic phase within a cultural and intellectual history-writing that too often has been avidly progressive and despairingly clairvoyant. So literary criticism becomes improgressive.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 196-7.

<sup>108</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture of Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 207.

Accordingly, the chapters that follow do not offer a ‘progressive’ delineation and definition of postmodernism or Hartman’s work. The focus of this thesis on particular texts is not for their exemplification as celebrations or manifestations of ‘types’ of postmodernism. For the same reason, the texts that are selected here are not from typically ‘postmodern writers’ but they are the products of a wish to write in the postmodern condition.

My work focuses on postmodern literary texts of the last fourteen years and examines novels of established contemporary authors, such as Douglas Coupland’s *JPod* (2006), Irvine Welsh’s *Filth* (1998) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Tent* (2006) but also introduces the work of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) and Brad Listi’s *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* (2006). In challenging traditional and more conventional forms, these novels capture some very characteristic elements and tendencies in postmodern literature. Drawing on Waugh’s talk of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ postmodernism I argue that the fiction explored here is ‘strongly’ postmodern. Its experimentation with textuality and incorporation of different artistic modes of expression accords also with Zygmunt Bauman’s characterization of postmodernity as ‘liquid’ modernity in its endemic uncertainty.<sup>109</sup> In short, these texts may appear more postmodern than others, offering a greater challenge to interpretation. Green deals with this diversity in postmodernity fiction by indentifying what he names as a ‘late postmodernism’. But his ‘late postmodernism’ is characterized not so much by the exaggeration and intensification of postmodern complexities but rather the return of postmodernism to modernism’s concerns whereby it ‘rejects, or at least revises, some of the bold pronouncements of the first generation of postmodernism, notably claims of annealing the divisions of the cultural terrain.’<sup>110</sup> In looking back to the first developments of postmodern fiction, Green’s ‘late postmodernism’ appears, then, more regulative in its postmodernity.

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<sup>109</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman’s *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>110</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 13.

This thesis will attempt to address whether such a revision within the postmodern qualifies as an endemic element of the nature of postmodernity.

Apart from Hassan's recognition of Hartman's critical contribution regarding the interconnection of politics and criticism in the postmodern condition and the acknowledgment of Hartman's work as aiming for a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, Hartman has not been approached before in relation to postmodernism or the reading of the postmodern text.<sup>111</sup> Hartman recognizes the effects of the postmodern condition in his cultural critique but he has not endeavoured to interpret the postmodern text with the same attention and intensity he gives to Romanticism and poetry.<sup>112</sup> It is, perhaps, his reading of poetry that has prevented his commentators establishing his possible input in literary postmodern criticism but Hartman's interpretation of poetry asserts the significance of close reading whatever the nature or genre of the text. This is why Hartman is invaluable in reading postmodern fiction and for invigorating the role of the literary critic in the postmodern condition. In *Scars of the Spirit*, Hartman follows Gianni Vattimo in examining the function of literary criticism in the postmodern through the act of reading:

The postmodern mode of critique finds its positive dimension through hermeneutics. A religious watching-in-patience that in the past acknowledged yet also tempered apocalyptic expectation is replaced by a broadened concept of *reading* as the scrutiny of nonsacred as well as sacred texts. Reading becomes a distinctively temporal, even temporizing, activity, requiring something more than the count-down of numerology or its variants. It makes time rather than seeks to speed it up. Whereas

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<sup>111</sup> See Hassan's *The Postmodern Turn*, particularly 177.

<sup>112</sup> Indicatively, in *Scars of the Spirit* Hartman proposes his aims as the examination of the role of the essay in the postmodern: 'My subject, then, is the function of literary criticism at a time when postmodern and fundamentalist perspectives clash without hope of accommodation. As a term, "postmodern" implies that we have entered a new epoch and, more significantly, that "modern" is no longer as adequate concept.' *Scars of the Spirit*, 138.

numerology wishes to anticipate the end, or a definitive, fulfilled present (*parousia*), reading practises associated with a historical hermeneutics have made room in – extended – a time pressured by apocalyptic expectation and political impatience. They create a livable secular space within a “time without end.”<sup>113</sup>

By making the process of reading the centre of his methodological approach, Hartman galvanizes the task of the interpreter in contemporary criticism. The text, as the stimulation of the creative process of reading, remains important; but for Hartman, equally important is the critical response to it. Still, Hartman recognizes that his advance and invitation of different readings may not always result in the voicing of constructive or enriching positions in the postmodern condition. Nevertheless, he objects to the fear of corruption for criticism, defends its literary status and announces ‘the third phase of modern criticism’ in the postmodern condition, ‘the Revisionist Reversal’ which ‘acknowledges the intellectual element in art but reinvests criticism with creative potential. It opposes those who abstract creative power from the critical essay. It is not afraid to see criticism as a contaminated creative thinking.’<sup>114</sup>

If, according to Hartman, ‘[t]he relation of the creative and critical must always be reenvisioned’, then this thesis aspires to offer a reenvisioning not only of the postmodern text but also of Hartman’s work.<sup>115</sup> By avoiding defining the postmodern definitively or extracting a theoretical or philosophical meaning in Hartman’s work, I seek to add to the discourses of criticism and the postmodern. The chapters that follow do not treat postmodern fiction as inflicted or infected by our times, or Hartman’s criticism as in danger of being undermined by his association with postmodern theory and literature. Instead, I identify five major issues in both Hartman’s criticism and postmodernism: representation, transgression, multiplicity of meaning, intellectual journeys and the nature and role of the critical essay

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<sup>113</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 139.

<sup>114</sup> Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

today. Each chapter takes a close look at these tension-spots and unravels the threads of that tension as they become manifest in the postmodern text. My aim is not the appropriation of the postmodern text for postmodernism or Hartman's theoretical contribution, but rather its reading. I aspire to respond to a contemporary evasion of close reading that ignores or simply accepts the postmodern text and to prove both that Hartman's work offers a way of reading postmodern fiction and also that the postmodern novel allows us to rethink Hartman.

As we have seen in the beginning of this introduction, problems of representation become the locus of a lot of theory on the postmodern. The following chapter of this thesis draws on Hartman's understanding and development of issues of representation and relates them to postmodern literature and specifically, Coupland's *JPod*, in an examination of the collaboration of image and text in the postmodern novel. The chapter begins by identifying the artistic struggle for representation in literature, as it becomes explored in Hartman's theoretical work. For Hartman, problems of representation shape literature from the Romantics to modernism and this chapter explores whether they affect the postmodern novel too and, if so, in which ways. More specifically, the chapter examines Coupland's application of images and illustrations in *JPod*, with pictures, graphics, sketches, drawing and also the playfulness with font types and an excessive use of numerical figures. The incorporation of images in the postmodern text has a dual effect: the use of illustrations proposes the collaboration of image and text for mediation and the engagement of the reader but, at the same time, the application of images fragments the text, exposing a rupture between representation and the image, and a continuous displacement of meaning, which implies a sense of loss. This dispersal of meaning complicates reading and interpretation.

The extensive reproduction of images in *JPod* facilitates a perceptual distance and a disenchanted approach to postmodernism's overflow of visual stimulations. At the same time, however, the fusion of a plethora of discourses and communicative languages (the language

of pictures or even that of numbers, for example) complicates interpretation. The technique may be perceived as indicative of a wish for what Hartman calls 'pure representation', the idealistic perception of language's communicative force, but at the same time, it also works as re-enchantment and for the re-engagement of a reading audience with the literary text. Chapter 2 attempts to respond to this enquiry by drawing on postmodern theory that identifies issues of representation as central in the understanding of the postmodern condition (for example, Baudillard's simulacra and simulation) and by relating them to Hartman's critical approaches and his theoretical development of issues of representation. The aim is to examine whether they can provide an insight into the reading, interpretation and analysis of the use of image in the postmodern text.

The question of how to read the use of illustrations and images in the postmodern text opens up the examination of the relation between visibility and orality, as it becomes manifested in the postmodern text and Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. In this story, a lack of visibility and the augmentation of the themes of darkness and blindness emphasize the auricular side of language. The structure and textuality of the novel, with its complicated and intriguing layout and its extreme typographical experimentation, advances the significance of attending to the sound of words. Here, the typography of the written word becomes a loudspeaker for the deliverance and exploration of multiple meanings, revealing an abundance of interpretative possibilities. But it is this profusion of meaning that complicates the reading of the text, raising questions of contextualization, direction and orientation within the narrative. Indeed, Danielewski's novel opens up multiple ways of approaching the order of its reading, none of which appear more significant or correct than another. By projecting and accommodating an affluence of interpretative approaches *House of Leaves* appears as a labyrinth. The richness of the text debilitates its reading.

*House of Leaves* raises the question of whether the advent and access of meaning is possible in a postmodern word that is characterized by an influx of images, print, information and a cacophony of voices. Hartman's interpretative approach becomes relevant since its particular interest in poetry discloses his sensitive address on the issue of the relation between the written and the oral in language, the appearance and sound of words, and the multiple meanings their *physis* reveals. Hartman's hermeneutics begin by attending to the plurality and dissemination of meaning by listening for the 'echoes' of words and their resonance. In this, Hartman's writings disclose a similar affect to that of *House of Leaves*: what complicates the reading of Hartman is its richness and the accommodation of an abundance of meanings. "Chapter 3: Calicoes of Echoes" explores the relation of typography and echoes of meaning in an attempt to respond to this problem of the reader's orientation both in the postmodern text and Hartman's criticism.

What often complicates the reader's orientation in the reading of postmodern fiction is the transgression of boundaries between imagination and the real in the postmodern text. Even more, the experimental form of postmodern literature transgresses conventional or typical understandings of the nature of the novel. By seeking to be more demotic (in incorporating pictures and images) postmodern literature exposes and transforms the dominant contemporary perception of what the literary text is. "Chapter 4: Transgression in the Postmodern Text" responds to this issue and begins by exploring the significance of the notion of transgression in the makings of postmodern fiction. Postmodern literature exceeds the boundaries or principles of the novel with pastiche, collage and graphic reproductions that challenge the reader's perception by constantly displacing meaning and by contrasting the factual, real and historical to the fictive. The transgression of the postmodern text's form signals the fusion or contamination of the imaginative and the historical. In Hartman's criticism, the possibility of merging the historical (factual) and literary (fictive) in the

production of a literary text signals the birth of a new theory of form: literary history. This, Hartman argues, can sustain and restore faith for both form and historical consciousness.

The central problematic of Welsh's *Filth*, the novel that becomes the focus of this fourth chapter, is the issue of the fusion of historical consciousness with artistic expression in the postmodern condition. This challenge is manifested in the text in two main ways: through the theme of transgression that the narration explores and the fragmentation that its textuality displays. The narrative of *Filth* follows the rules of the detective story and deals with issues of transgression and the infraction of the law, creating a factual, realistic and historical setting for the protagonist. At the same time, however, this interpretation of the law becomes paramorphic to the text, altering its form with the intrusion of the graphics of a parasite, a tapeworm that 'trickles' down the pages of *Filth*, infesting and consuming the main narrative and assuming its own narrative voice. In this way, what represents the factual or real in the text becomes intercepted and disfigured from within and by an element that is the product of the main narration. As this transgressive force appears intrinsic to the nature and formulation of the text, this chapter proceeds to examine the implications of that for postmodern fiction. The question that follows is whether the transgression of the postmodern text is in fact didactic, exposing the postmodern text as parasitical and pointing back to previous traditional forms of narration. If the postmodern text impresses upon us the consequences of a loss of reality and identity is it proposing the postmodern's entropy as an 'evil' rather than a literary advance or progression? Furthermore, Hartman's call for an interpretation that does not seek to identify the text's maladies or entropy, appears, in the context of postmodern critiques, as transgressive itself in not seeking to identify, as do other postmodern critiques, the elements that characterize the text as postmodern comparatively and through attending to its transgression from previous forms and genres. The problem to which this chapter begins to respond to is how postmodern criticism should proceed.



The chapter that follows looks more closely at the manner in which Hartman's criticism progresses and explores the effects of his intellectual journeys in his critical contributions. Hartman's criticism does not offer the solace of reaching a particular point or end in his interpretation. His theory and style are characteristic of an unsettledness that avoids polarization or conclusions and thrives on evasion. "Chapter 5: The Text, the Step and the Walk" approaches Hartman as a literary vagabond and follows his critical developments not only in the revisions of his positions but also in his autobiographical commentary. At the same time, this chapter attempts to respond to the nature of the postmodern novel as part of a continuation from modernism and as a literary progression. The choice of the text that is examined here may initially appear to complicate matters: Listi's *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. is at first sight rendering the story of a physical journey rather than a conceptual one. However, Listi's novel captures the realization that postmodern fiction today is the result of its exposure to a plethora of already established and explored directions, both intellectual and material. The central question of the chapter is what it is that Hartman's criticism reveals through its intellectual travels that may contribute to and assist the understanding and reading of the progression or development of the postmodern text. If Hartman's criticism lacks the sharpness of particular points and conclusions, can it respond to the equally fluent nature of postmodern fiction? To respond to this concern the chapter begins by focusing on the exploration of two main issues. Firstly, I address the survival and development of travel fiction and the figure of the traveler in the postmodern condition and in a world where the concept of exploration of exotic places has become demystified through contemporary technological advances. Secondly, I examine the significance of discovery in defining both a literal and a conceptual landscape in literary writings.

Hassan suggests that the ‘artist is always a pilgrim in progress.’<sup>116</sup> *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* issues from the tension that develops between the constant movement in the postmodern condition and a wish for a stop, a resting place and the hope of revelation. The text manifests this later aspiration through the inclusions of definitions and lists that appear to be included in order to stabilize meaning. However, while reconstructing or restoring meaning, these definitions also inspire and generate new understandings for the narration that surrounds them. In displacing the attestation of a physical exploration, Listi’s definitions become indicative of a wish to mediate and map out an intellectual *topos*. Still, as Hartman’s input reveals, the homeless imagination defers formulation.

The last chapter of the thesis attempts to respond to the contextualization of the postmodern text, literary criticism and Hartman’s critical contribution in the postmodern condition. For this reason, “Chapter 6: The (Con)Tent of the Literature of Criticism” focuses on a recent publication from Atwood, a collection of short stories, poetry and essays titled *The Tent*. I suggest that this compilation of different narrative styles and genres raises question about the position and role of poetry, the short story and the essay in the postmodern condition. Atwood’s discourse revolves around the problematic of assuming a narrative voice in the postmodern condition, an issue that permeates the makings of any literary expression today. In its preoccupation with the process and position of writing, *The Tent* could be approached as an incorporation of what Patricia Waugh calls metafiction or stories about stories. Yet, this hypothesis would have to approach poetry, the short story and the critical essay as qualifications of metafiction and as second or subordinate to more traditional or conventional modes of writing.

The chapter explores the secondariness of these genres with a particular focus on the problematic of the essay as metafiction and its relation to the postmodern text. If the language

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<sup>116</sup> Hassan, *Radical Innocence*, 322.

of criticism in the postmodern condition is what Barthes describes in *Elements of Semiology* (1967) as metalanguage (discourse that explains discourse) and if some American postmodern critics are correct in approaching the postmodern text as the ‘metafiction of the period’, then what is the relation of the literary to the critical text in the postmodern?<sup>117</sup> The suggestion seems to imply that today postmodern criticism assumes a style that is fictional and in close proximity to the critical spirit and self-reflection of the postmodern text. Hartman notes his reservation about the emergence of a new ethic that is preoccupied with an affirmation of the marginalized or different and despite his call for creativity in the critical text, he remains cautious of such a disintegration of boundaries and postmodernism’s accommodating qualities.<sup>118</sup> In this final chapter I seek to explore whether Hartman’s affirmation of the creative in criticism can be reconciled with the creativity displayed in the postmodern text.

To summarize, the present thesis undertakes a series of case studies of recent postmodern fiction, from both mainstream and more experimental authors, in order to assess Hartman’s contribution to the reading of the postmodern text and to argue that the novel is not exhausted in the postmodern condition but rather that it continues to transform itself in unexpected and compelling ways. At the same time, this thesis suggests that in the same manner that we cannot afford to turn away from Hartman’s critical contribution due to the difficulties it presents, we cannot turn away from the challenge of the reading of the postmodern text. ‘What is unexamined is not lived.’<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Barthes, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 4.

<sup>118</sup> ‘The blurring of boundaries is not a good in itself. Promiscuous or hybrid literary forms can easily degenerate, yet such forms are the crucible from which new and discriminating achievements have traditionally come. It should not be surprising, then, that literary criticism also has its boundary problems, and that new kinds of commentary are emerging.’ “How Creative Should Literary Criticism Be?” *The New York Times*, by Geoffrey Hartman, April 5, 1981.

<sup>119</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 131.

## Chapter 2

### Image in the Postmodern Text

‘If too much seeing makes the author blind,  
his blindness makes me see.’<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I engage with the examination of one of the elements that typify a novel as postmodern: its use of image. I will be drawing on Douglas Coupland’s *JPod*, focusing on the text’s graphical representations in order to relate their appearance to aspects of Hartman’s critical work. The aim of this chapter is to facilitate the analysis of the nature of the postmodern collaboration between image and text. The first section addresses aspects of Hartman’s theoretical contribution that focus on literary problems of representation and their significance for the emergence of the artistic self. After a historical review of the use of image in literature, I investigate the nature and development of representational problems in postmodern fiction and their projection in Coupland’s fiction. In the section “Image in *JPod*: A Disenchantment”, I examine the nature of images in *JPod* and relate aspects of Hartman’s criticism to investigate whether these inform the reading of the text. The chapter continues by identifying and attending to the main ways in which images appear in *JPod* and exploring whether Hartman’s analytical approach provides an insight into the consideration of issues of representation in the postmodern novel. I

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 6.

conclude by surveying the focal points in which Hartman's practice may alleviate one of the challenges reading postmodern fiction presents.

## **2.1. The Question of Representation.**

One of the many challenges that we are faced with in reading postmodern fiction is the frequent use of illustration in the literary text. The inclusion of images (including pictures, graphics, sketches, or drawings) has a dual effect. On the one hand, the combination of text and image proposes collaboration: if 'a picture is worth a thousand words' then, for the author, the incorporation of image in the literary text may suggest a wish for more immediate modes of artistic expression and more versatile ways of thinking about what constitutes creative identity.<sup>2</sup> The broadened scope of the image may invite and facilitate the reader's instantaneous engagement with the text. In other words, the employment of image in the composition of the postmodern text may seek to capture and represent a range of contemporary stimulations, holistically. On the other hand, however, the use of image exposes fragmentation and disunity. The incorporation of image in the postmodern text highlights a sense of rupture, with the text appearing discontinuous in its parts and in disjunction. In the postmodern novel, image does not always act as illustration or visual representation of the narrative, nor does the text appear as the image's

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<sup>2</sup> For a cinematic example that explores questions of identity through various incorporations and the manipulation of images, see Richard Linklater's rotoscope film, *Waking Life* (2001). The technique of rotoscoping traces the actors filmed in live action footage and re-draws the cinematic strip, painting it over to produce animated sequences. In projecting live action as animation, this mode of filming is based on the real and the reality of physical movement but, at the same time, it also negates the real, producing cartoon characters and the illusion of action. *Waking Life* recreates a sense of realism but only to distort it in the projection of animated figures, which intercept with the main character's progression, as we follow him in a self-exploration. Yet, in a twist, the film collapses the boundaries of what is real or illusionary in another way and by disintegrating the differentiation of what happens in the protagonist's dreams or real life.

descriptive caption.<sup>3</sup> The abstract and fracturing effects of the appearance of image in the postmodern text emphasize a sense of loss, as the interplay between image and text continuously displaces meaning and raises a problem of correlation between representation and communication. This dispersal of meaning complicates reading and interpretation.

For postmodern fiction, the incorporation of illustrations in the text may have come as a response to a difficulty that the artist has always encountered: the problem of representation. Hypostatization and the rendering of the subject has always been a concern that defined artistic expression. Ancient Greek art has often been approached as determined by a wish for accurate representation of what was visible. Yet, at the same time, and as Plato claims in *The Republic*, representation not only relates to the depiction of the object but also to the originating of character and the establishment of individual identity.<sup>4</sup> Hartman argues that representation signals the ‘début’ or the ‘coming out’ of the creative self.<sup>5</sup> Artistic identity is caught by the desire to correspond the internal with the external, insight with oversight. The desire for asserting individuality sets the artist’s struggle in, what Hartman calls, the ‘quest to get beyond “representation” to “presence”’.<sup>6</sup> The problem of representation is thus located between the contest of nature and the creative self.

In *The Fate of Reading* (1975), Hartman recalls his first critical text, *The Unmediated Vision* (1954) and confesses: ‘When I was young [...] I had no need of

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<sup>3</sup> This would be the case for illustrated literature (comic, picture book, etc), where text accompanies picture.

<sup>4</sup> The allegory of the cave suggests that by exiting the den, man can perceive things as they truly are and this vision should guide him to act with that truth in mind: ‘...my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eyes fixed.’ Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 217.

<sup>5</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 37.

heaven and hell. I lived instead in chaos: “Es regnet mir in die Augen”. Perception was enough, and too much.’<sup>7</sup> Hartman considers that, in its early stage, his commentary on Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry was defined by a search for an unmediated vision and a sense of purification or concentration. In retrospect he explains: ‘In *The Unmediated Vision* the tyranny of sight in the domain of sensory organization is acknowledged, and symbol-making is understood as a kind of “therapeutic alliance” between the eye and other senses through the medium of art.’<sup>8</sup> Between the object and the subject, symbolism is approached as reconciliation between nature and the creative genius. Because, as Hartman’s claims, the Romantic poets in question ‘refuse any but human and sensory intermediaries to knowledge’, they become ‘haunted by the idea of reification’ and affected by the ‘*inherent* arbitrariness of symbols’.<sup>9</sup> In *The Unmediated Vision*, Hartman’s intention was to ‘translate’ the symbolic, leaving the medium of referential signs behind and following the poet’s quest for pure representation. Pure representation, as Hartman perceives it, is to be found beyond the relational associations of the object, to the poet’s ‘urge to construct that ideal system of symbols which relieves consciousness of the eyes’ oppression but assures it of the eye’s luminosity’.<sup>10</sup> The fulfilment of pure representation would suggest a *parousia* - the presence of the idea in the form - and in that sense, it would equate perception and representation. Yet, is it possible, Hartman asks in *The Fate of Reading*, for ‘representation [to] become “pure”? Can the artist or the interpreter consider himself simply a witness?’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 4. The German translates: “It’s raining into my eyes” or “The rain gets into my eyes”.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 156, 160, 161.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 128-9.

<sup>11</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 7.

Representation inevitably confronts the artist with himself. As the self seeks to emerge and assume an identity it becomes easy to rest on established forms. In this way, and through the ‘inevitability of self-assertion,’ the artist seeks to reconcile the object with representation of the self.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the figures or symbols of his choice will always ‘point to a lack: to something used up or lost or not sufficiently “present”’. They do not in short, imitate so much as test (feel out) a desired mode of being.’<sup>13</sup> In *The Fate of Reading*, Hartman recognizes and names this advance as ‘representation-compulsion’. Representation-compulsion is not an impulse that urges the artist to represent the self through what is perceived, but rather, a forcible condition that the poet is continuously faced with, by way of language, as the representation of the self repeatedly points to something inadequate or unfeasible. Language will always point to something unattainable and the problem of representation is thus rooted for Hartman, in the realization that ‘fault lies with language’.<sup>14</sup>

## **2.2. Before Postmodernism.**

Hartman’s reflections locate the problem of representation within the nature of language and it is this realization that offers a means of linking image and text in literature. From as early as the start of the seventeenth century, illustration and poetry come together, as in George Herbert’s ‘The Altar’ or ‘Easter Wings’, which advance emblematic poetry to collapse ‘picture and poem into one, presenting the emblem image by its very shape’.<sup>15</sup> This came as an attempt to deal with the impossibility of

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<sup>12</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>15</sup> M. H. Abrams, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (London: Norton, 2000), 1957. ‘The Altar’ for example, is imitating and reconstructing the shape of an altar where the poet’s heart ‘Meets in this frame / To praise thy Name’. From John N. Wall Jr., ed., *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 139.



praising God's creation with the same language Christianity derives from God.<sup>16</sup> William Hogarth's engravings and paintings were composed in a series of pictures that told often satirical and yet moralizing stories at a time when new forms of artwork became more accessible to all.<sup>17</sup> The Enlightenment's principles of reason, equality and tolerance put forward the demand for representation that would emancipate man with knowledge and logic. Romanticism came to oppose Enlightenment's empirical claims of power over nature and epistemological perspectives. The poetry of William Blake signals a shift in the issue of representation. Indicatively, in the two poems of 'There is no Natural Religion', Blake both expresses and opposes Enlightenment's assertion that 'Man cannot naturally Perceive. but through his natural or bodily organs' to 'Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. he perceives more than senses (tho' ever so acute) can discover'.<sup>18</sup> Hartman refers to the difference between sight and insight, finding 'the faculty of sight [is] both the most oppressive and the most enlightening'.<sup>19</sup> Oppressive, because the mind must struggle to be liberated by what the eye sees and seek the 'imageless vision', 'visibility without image', 'perception without percepts', to reach 'pure representation'.<sup>20</sup> Enlightening, because the eye allows perception. Blake's compositions bring together both engravings and poetry, merging the material body of the engraving with the lyric. In this way, Blake's work reflects a rejection of the dialectic opposition between body and soul.

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<sup>16</sup> In the Christian tradition, the worship of God with emblems or illustration is complicated by the prohibition of symbols as iconolatry. Also, Hartman finds that Christopher Smart's lyric reveals the two sides of the problem of representation: that God is not attainable with mortal speech and that 'fault lies with language.' Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> The telling of a story through pictures can also be related to the story of Philomela, which Hartman refers to in his essay "The Fate of Reading." Philomela has her tongue cut by the King to prevent her telling of his sexual attack and weaves a tapestry of her testimony.

<sup>18</sup> Both poems in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 127.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 129.

Reacting to the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment's commitment to clarity and rationalization, the arrival of Romanticism affirms a need for a different mode of artistic expression. The aspirations of getting rid of the obscurity surrounding knowledge issued another unsettlement: if Enlightenment's empowerment proceeds from ideals of accessibility to scientific knowledge for all, then epistemology replaces authoritative positions rather than allowing the practise of thinking for the individual. In his introduction to *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Thomas Docherty draws on the Frankfurt School to explain that,

Enlightenment itself is not the great demystifying force which will reveal and unmask ideology; rather, it is precisely the locus of ideology, thoroughly contaminated internally by the ideological assumption that the world can match – indeed, can be encompassed by – our reasoning about it, or that the human is not alienated by the very process of consciousness itself from the material world of which it desires knowledge in the first place. Enlightenment, postulated upon reason, is – potentially, at least – undone by the form that such reason takes.<sup>21</sup>

The upholding of reason as an emancipatory force necessitates, in turn, a requirement for its legitimation. It is this legitimation of reason that Romanticism questions. What the Romantic poets seem to have sensed is the effects of what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as the sublime. According to Lyotard, the sublime occurs 'when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept'.<sup>22</sup> It fails because, in the search for pure representation, the imagination of

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 78.

the poet has to leave behind images of nature.<sup>23</sup> It is the sensing of the sublime that becomes the problematic of Romantic poetry. Hartman reminds us that poetry ‘has often been defined as “a speaking picture”’ but if ‘words do not answer to words’ how is representation possible?<sup>24</sup> For Hartman, it is only Wordsworth who manages to transform poetry that is inscriptive or descriptive to a ‘subtler mode which serves to free the lyric from the tyranny of point’ and so, come closest to a reconciliation of what is perceived (Nature) and the creative self (Imagination).<sup>25</sup>

The offspring of this kind of ‘unpointed’ poetry is to be found in the doctrine of modernism. Modernism partly reacted to the demands of realism and its interest in faithful depiction of the subject, challenging ideas of stability and setting the real in flux. By attempting to present the unrepresentable, modernism took an experimental approach to issues of form and style, concentrating and engaging in more depth on writing (*écriture*) itself.<sup>26</sup> The concern with the sublime and the metaphysical, however, is still present in modernist writing: as Lyotard notes, ‘modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and

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<sup>23</sup> Despite a common understanding of Hartman’s criticism as ending the notion of Wordsworth as a nature poet, Hartman claims that he has established Wordsworth’s poetry as a return to nature ‘within a moment of thinking’, that he has showed ‘how reflective nature poetry was in Wordsworth’ and that Wordsworth was playing with ‘the design’ without allowing it to become a central concern. Stuart Barnett, “*Geistersprache*: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman,” *Connecticut Review* 18 (1996): 21-38.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 21; Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 128.

<sup>25</sup> For Hartman, Wordsworth ‘transformed the inscription into an independent nature poem, and in so doing created a principal form of the Romantic and modern lyric.’ Before Wordsworth ‘the inscription just points to the landscape. Now natural life mingles with the poet’s imagination.’ Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 221-222; 45.

<sup>26</sup> In “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism”, Lyotard offers a definition of modernism: ‘I shall call modern the art which devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ [son ‘petit technique’], as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible.’ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

pleasure.’<sup>27</sup> As Lyotard suggests, there is in modernism an attention to what is always elided or missing. Modernism communicates the wish to overcome the Hellenistic desire for visibility but it does not surpass the problem of representation. As Hartman puts it:

The problem, then, with antirepresentational theories – which try to free rhetoric from representational ends – is that they are more referential than they know: they have secretly declared what the *bad* magic is, even if they consistently and rigorously doubt that it can be remedied by the good word, or any word-cure whatsoever. For them the bad magic, the fatal charm, is representation itself. The very force and pathos of mimetic desire and envy. These are questioned; yet writing cannot question them by means of the living; voice, indeed, is among the questionable charms.<sup>28</sup>

The modernist attempt to recover the voice of the unconscious (the unrepresentable) through writing defers the problem of representation.<sup>29</sup> Modernism’s reaction to the real does not eradicate the creative struggle for representation. Language and the question of representation also define, as I hope to prove, the emergence and form of postmodern literature.

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<sup>27</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 120.

<sup>29</sup> Reacting to the modernists, the imagists (Pound, etc) asserted that the poem needed to be cleared of images and the use of colloquial language.

### 2.3. Representation in the Postmodern Novel: Coupland's Artifact.

Thus far I have suggested that Hartman's criticism informs the problematic of representation and that image has been critical in the composition and development of modern Western literature. With problems of representation becoming more acute in the era of postmodern literature, Hartman's insight, I propose, might help in illuminating a way of interpreting texts that are difficult to comprehend. In an attempt to clarify the nature and problematic term of postmodernism, Thomas Docherty notes: 'Either postmodernism is seen as a counter to – or in opposition to – modernism, or it is seen as its *bizarre* continuation.'<sup>30</sup> The dilemma Docherty identifies reflects the complexity and challenge postmodern fiction presents for interpretation and critical analysis. In postmodern literature any sense of 'recognizable consistency' or consolation in familiar forms disappears. The postmodern text employs different art forms, pastiche, quotations, media and technological developments and it becomes characterized by pluralistic depictions of often subversive points of view. Postmodern literature thus complicates the interpretative task and presents a challenge for critical readings.

What perplexes interpretation further, is the perceptual plurality that characterizes postmodern fiction. Experimentation, displayed in postmodern literature through the use of image, perpetuates and intensifies problems of representation, proposing a rupture with traditional literary forms. However, it is this persisting challenge of representation that establishes postmodernism as the continuation of earlier literary epochs. As Lyotard argues,

the 'post-' of postmodernism has the sense of a simple succession, a diachronic sequence of periods in which each one is clearly

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism / Postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15, my italics.

identifiable. The ‘post-’ indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one.

Now this idea of linear chronology is itself perfectly ‘modern’. It is at once part of Christianity, Cartesianism, and Jacobinism: since we are inaugurating something completely new, the hands of the clock should be put back to zero. The very idea of modernity is closely correlated with the principle that it is both possible and necessary to break with tradition and institute absolutely new ways of living and thinking.<sup>31</sup>

While the use of image in dealing with representational issues suggests postmodernism as the successor of modernism, Lyotard’s argument implies that approaching postmodernism as the continuation of modernism is a modernist move. However, his argument also illustrates that a claim that views the challenges of postmodernism as ‘something completely new’ would overlook the instrumental features of the development of postmodernism. As I have previously noted, the ‘marriage’ of image and text is not novel. What remains to be examined is how the fusion of text and image takes place in postmodern fiction. More specifically, how are we to read the employment of image in the postmodern text?

To respond to this question, I draw on a postmodern text which experiments extensively with uses of image and illustration: Douglas Coupland’s *JPod* (2006). As with other texts that experiment with image, *JPod*’s critical reception has been controversial. Patrick Ness suggests in his article ‘Canada Dry’ that *JPod* is merely an ‘upgrade’ to Coupland’s 1995 novel, *Microserfs*, in that it reproduces and engages

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<sup>31</sup> Jean François Lyotard, ‘Note on the Meaning of “Post-”’ In *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence, 1982-1985* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992), 90.

with the same themes of new technology.<sup>32</sup> Scarlett Thomas's review appears more reproachful as Thomas concludes: 'Is this a sickeningly realistic portrait of postmodern culture? Or is it a product that's so easy to consume you can keep MTV on in the background while you read it? It's actually very hard to tell.'<sup>33</sup> Literary reception appears to tabulate *JPod* either as a tentative representation of contemporary reality or as a text emerging through a 'leakage' of contemporary images in fiction. The controversy that surrounds *JPod* results primarily from its continuous graphical inclusions, which disrupt and fragment the narrative, presenting a challenge to analytical readings.

It is not unlike Coupland to employ visual insertions in his fiction. His illustrations and graphical variations appear to serve the purpose of displaying and connoting a preoccupation with consumerism and capitalism. In Coupland's debut novel, *Generation X* (1991), images of signs displaying apothegmatic statements are used to supplement and enrich the text's opposition and resistance to the contemporary consumerist culture. The main characters appear at the skirts of society, deliberately pursuing low-paid, low-responsibility jobs ('McJobs'). As Andrew Tate suggests, *Generation X* 'performs the paradoxical task of rendering visible a body of people who primarily define themselves as imperceptible to the culture at large.'<sup>34</sup> Yet, in *Generation X*, the three main characters appear to react to capitalist society by replacing products and mannerisms associated with consumerism with their oppositions, as if to suggest that true meaning or truth is antithetical or peripheral to mainstream life.<sup>35</sup> In 1995 Coupland's *Microserfs* appears 'hesitant to commit itself to

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<sup>32</sup> Patrick Ness, "Canada Dry", *The Guardian*, June 3, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Scarlett Thomas, "Worker see, worker do", *The Independent*, June 25, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Tate, *Douglas Coupland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>35</sup> However, the mark of the X that defines this group of people (and an entire generation during the 1990s) is suggestive of the mark X on a treasure hunt map and, as such, it is evocative of a substituted materialism, rather than the expurgation of consumerism.

an uncompromisingly anti-capitalistic viewpoint.’<sup>36</sup> Written in the form of an electronic journal, the novel displays capitalism’s infiltration with an emphatic enthusiasm for new technology and its products, a theme repeated in *JPod*.<sup>37</sup> Coupland’s technological and sociological concerns often find expression in his novels via images.

Coupland has openly acknowledged the effects of image in his writing style. His general approach to fiction views the text as similar to the exhibition of a painting in an art gallery where, as he says, ‘each of my novels is a different picture.’<sup>38</sup> The visualization of Coupland’s characters is similarly expressed through repeated reproductions of images. As Tate suggests of *Generation X*, the use of image in the body of the text facilitates the definition of the self in the narrative:

Each of the characters wishes to resist the contemporary tendency to live ‘life as a succession of isolated little cool moments’ without coherence or meaning (GX, 10). Yet Coupland uses a series of these ‘isolated little cool moments’ as a way of structuring the narrative and suggests that the stories that his protagonists crave are in turn dependent on such Wordsworthian ‘spots of time’.<sup>39</sup>

*JPod* is similarly composed by such photographic narrative takes, but here visual impressions appear more dramatic and striking, fracturing the narration of the text and imposing images on the reader. This unconventional representation of extraordinary

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<sup>36</sup> Tate, *Douglas Coupland*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Matt Beaumont’s 2000 novel, *E.*, is written as entries of a series of exchanged office e-mails.

<sup>38</sup> From Coupland’s interview on the Canadian television show “The Hour” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi9QZx5\\_NCc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi9QZx5_NCc&feature=related). Also see Matt Thornes’ “Interview: Novelist Douglas Coupland on surviving the technological revolution” for *The Independent*, October 21, 2007, Books section, where Coupland explains: ‘I’m a visual thinker. Research tells us that only 20 per cent of people think visually. So what about the other 80 per cent? Don’t they think in pictures? I mean if you imagine washing and preparing potatoes you visualise the process, right?’

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Tate, “‘Now here is my secret’: Ritual and Epiphany in Douglas Coupland’s Fiction.” *Literature and Theology*, 16.3 (2002), 331.



characters is suggestive of a wish for the recognition of individuality. Despite repeated interruptions of the narrative flow and form, the typology of the characters remains clear in *JPod*. Cowboy is obsessed with online sex sites; Bree is a Japanese femme fatal; John Doe is the boy that grew up in a lesbian commune and struggles to become invisible (which is his perception of normality); Mark is obsessed with edible stationary; Kaitlin is an ex-obese girl still struggling with her weight; and Ethan, the protagonist, a dedicated collector of trainers, has a father who has not given up his aspirations of appearing in cinema, a mother who secretly grows and sells cannabis (but is otherwise typically suburban) and a brother who is involved in illegal activities with people trafficking and sweatshops. The exposure of this information about the characters is often arranged in devoted pages or set within framed textual space, reproducing the effects of images of electronic windows. Coupland's textual techniques support the visualization of descriptions of characters as a succession of images and endorse the 'picturing' of a text.<sup>40</sup>

Although images in *JPod* facilitate the interrelation of characters and the configuration of the narrative, their use for establishing identity and individualism undermines the realistic effects of the narrative. When Ethan composes a depiction of himself in order to sell himself online, for example, he projects his character within an outlined textual environment. Under the heading 'Description' he enters:

Ethan was developed in a cool, dry, non-smoking home and was released in 1976. His body movements are disarmingly realistic, and his voice feature often works when connected to a compatible play set.

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<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, *JPod* was adapted to become a television series in Canada. The series were cancelled but recently CBC has been under pressure, from a faithful and active online Coupland fan base, to air the remaining episodes.

Ethan is a hard-to-find item, especially in this condition, Good to Very Good or better. He has no tan and his acne ended four years ago. All wiring and plumping are in good order. No manual is included, but his operation is highly intuitive. WARNING: Ethan doesn't respond well when people try to change him. Highest bidder takes him as is, NO REFUNDS.<sup>41</sup>

The perceptual distance that emerges from Ethan's account, highlighted by the form of this entry, alludes to an indifferent and distant perception of the self and thus to an implied objectivity. However, it also imparts an understanding of the JPoders as static figures. Indeed, in *JPod*, characters do not develop emotionally or psychologically and they appear to acquire no personal insights. Representations of identity take the form of outlines or sketches of animation-like characters. The introduction of the group in the text takes place under the consecutive titles of 'Living Cartoon Profile No 1', two, and so forth, which are followed by the listing of main characteristics (name, gender and personal likings, such as preferred room temperature, etc) in a style that mimics onscreen descriptions of computer game characters.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, one could argue for a correlation between Ethan's story and what happens to the skateboarding turtle of 'Board X', the hero of the game JPoders have to produce. *JPod*'s designers produce entertainment games by creating formats for electronic characters but in the text they also appear to project themselves in a similar manner.

In *JPod*, it seems that it is only within the setting of electronic space that the individual can discover the forms that allow the publishing and establishing of the Self. Images in the text support such an adaptation but, at the same time, they act to assign identity as artifact. To understand the function of images in representations of

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<sup>41</sup> Douglas Coupland, *JPod* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 178.

<sup>42</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 36-40.

the self, one can turn to Baudrillard's famous "Simulacra and Simulation", where he advances the successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality;
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality;
3. It masks the *absence* of a basic reality;
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an *evil* appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it *plays at being* an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearances at all, but of simulation.<sup>43</sup>

The Latin 'simulacre' translates as 'to put on an appearance of'. What Baudrillard suggests for the last stage is that image puts on the appearance of image, imitating, duplicating and reproducing itself, in a process that resembles what in biology is cell mitosis. As the characters appear to emulate the fixed and unaffected nature of the merchandize they create, problems of representation appear to collapse. Identity and simulations or simulacrums of the self seem to merge in *JPod*, through the fusion of image and text. Yet images in *JPod* are not projected as faithful imitations.

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<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 170.

## 2.4. Image in *JPod*: Black and White Magic.

‘JPod’ is a coded expression that identifies a particular working group and their location in a computer games designer’s company. The letter *J* stands for the first letter of the main characters’ surnames and JPoders are restricted to the company’s underground floor. The ‘JPod’ categorization instigates an understanding of identity as branded product, in two respects: on one level, JPoders develop and produce fictional, computer characters as merchandize; on another, the projection of the main characters’ individual identity adapts to the appearance of products, coexisting with other images of produce in the text.<sup>44</sup> The group’s isolation, estranged allocation and the nature of their work could be perceived as a contemporary version of sweatshops. JPoders are allowed some degree of creative freedom but, essentially, their technological input appears mundane, directed by company strategies and capricious upper-management preferences. In that sense, images in *JPod* demystify the technologically advanced working place, projecting graphical inclusions that deflate a contemporary fascination with products and technical progress, but also productivity and career aspirations.

In the text, images take a variety of forms; transcriptions of advertising texts and imitations of product packaging, renderings of Chinese characters, seemingly scattered letters, internet pages and reproductions of e-mails, imitations of computer games and listings of continuous numbers all add to the voyeuristic effects of *JPod*. It is through this employment of images that *JPod* merges different aspects of contemporary reality, bringing together different modes of discourse, ethnicities and languages, particularly through its references to their communication through the World Wide Web. Indeed, it is the incorporation of images that distinguish this

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<sup>44</sup> Images of products include reproductions of noodle-soup, whiteboard cleaners, Doritos and TV channels. Coupland, *JPod*, 21; 75; 170; 188-190.

Coupland novel as postmodern, but the appearance of images challenges its reception and complicates the analysis of the nature of collaboration of image and text. The reader is driven to either explore the relation of images and seek for a unifying thread or search for an escape from their allure and avoid engaging with those images altogether. In a different context, Hartman suggests that ‘though a text is discontinuously woven of many strands or codes, there is magic in the web. The sense of an informing spirit, however limited or conditioned, or outwitting those limits and conditions, is what hold us. To exorcise that spirit is to make the web inefficacious’.<sup>45</sup> In the context of *JPod*, Hartman’s comments are helpful in illuminating that the strands that hold the reader’s attention may include images and that those illustrations constitute the ‘magic’ of the text. To bypass or ignore *JPod*’s images not only undermines the value of this text but demonstrates their effect. Even in the denial of engaging with its images, it is *JPod*’s illustrations that condition the reading experience and engross the reader’s interest.

In *JPod*, graphic insertions do not simply endeavour to catch the reader’s eye but interlock an engaging gaze, surpassing observation or an external, elevated overview. This is perhaps because in *JPod* images do not appear as faithful imitations of real items. The novel’s reproductions obviate likeness and suggest a superficial or selective outlining of the rendered object. Significantly, while images in *JPod* imitate form, they lack colours. The unexpected insertion of a page dedicated to the reproduction of ‘Nissin Oriental Noodle Soup’, for example, is an imitation of the layout and structure of the accompanying text on the package of the product.<sup>46</sup> Images that relay the group’s characters are, equally, reproductions of electronic layouts, which focus on the framing of text in the page. Attention falls on the form and

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<sup>45</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 254.

<sup>46</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 21.

placement of words in the composition and appearance of the image.<sup>47</sup> Barthes suggests that the advertising image is composed by the denoted (the literal image), which facilitates the understanding of the image, and the connoted (the symbolic image), which assumes the photograph or cover.<sup>48</sup> In *JPod*, the image is the denoted. If *JPod*'s characters are set in the text as products, Coupland makes sure that we read the label. The captivating powers of these images rely on the way they require the reader to imaginatively reproduce the connoted image and envisage the elements that constitute the rest of the 'picture'. In his introduction to *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Zygmunt Bauman suggests that 'postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*. It is the modern artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning-legislating reason that has been exposed, condemned and put to shame'.<sup>49</sup> In *JPod*, it is the appearance of words in the composition of image that instigate the reader's imagination and impel a sense of enchantment.

In *JPod*, formation of image occurs through the juxtaposition of black and white. At the time of writing *JPod*, Coupland 'switched from writing at night to writing in the morning'.<sup>50</sup> The contrast of night and day, luminosity and darkness, gloss and shade is expressed in the novel through the form images take within the text. This is a *chiaroscurist* postmodern condition, where sketches of light and darkness are employed to produce postmodern representation. In *JPod*, the

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<sup>47</sup> See Ihab Hassan: '[F]orm is the way the mind acknowledges experience. It is a mode of awareness.' *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 97.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes suggests that 'knowing that a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers is a system of connotation, we may say immediately that the literal image is *denoted* and the symbolic image *connoted*.' This relates to the intentionality of the advertising message. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977), 37.

<sup>49</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), x.

<sup>50</sup> Matt Thorne, "Interview: Novelist Douglas Coupland on surviving the technological revolution", *The Independent*, October 21, 2007, Books section.

appearance of ink over white paper is rather emphatic of the act of writing (*écriture*) for both images and text. This consistency binds the diverse elements of the text and establishes some sense of unity. At the same time, the black and white components of the text may appear reductive or responsive to a contemporary fascination with chromatic saturation. For this, images here may be perceived as setting up disenchantment from voyeurism. While Bauman argues for the restoration of enchantment in the postmodern, Hartman suggests in *The Fate of Reading* that to move beyond the modern tradition disenchantment must take place. Hartman recognizes the need to move beyond what he calls ‘organized wonder’, the plethora of images and information explosion that often incite schematic reception, indifference and insipidity.<sup>51</sup> What is needed for Hartman is an approach to language that does not fall back into set ways of expression or wonders before the word’s elusiveness. For Hartman, ‘language is what it always was’: enchanting and magical.<sup>52</sup> What is required is disenchantment. *JPod* projects a disenchanted approach in regards to the contemporary overflow of visual stimulation; but, more importantly, by using language in the representation of images *JPod* establishes a perceptual distance that allows for disenchantment to take place. What challenges such disenchantment is that *JPod* fuses a plethora of discourses and languages.

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<sup>51</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 250.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 253.

## 2.5. Image and Numbers.

In 2008, Will Self gave a lecture for the “Free Thinking Liverpool Festival”, in which he elaborated on the observation that ‘people think in words only when they are called upon to say what they’re thinking’.<sup>53</sup> Self’s remarks raise the question of how people perceive things outside the realm of language. Wittgenstein’s response to this would be ‘private language’. Wittgenstein defines ‘private language’ as the experience of sensations before they become defined by public concepts; in other words, before they begin to ‘point’ to words.<sup>54</sup> What Wittgenstein names ‘private language’ is a concept that has also preoccupied Paul Valéry. Valéry sought not only to attend to his ‘immediate, private, sensations’ but also to graphically represent them by constructing (creating a map of) his mind.<sup>55</sup> In *The Unmediated Vision*, Hartman suggests that Valéry pursued ‘a body that would answer entirely to the notion of his eyes.’<sup>56</sup> In his pursuit of pure representation, Valéry sought, what Brian Stimpson described as, ‘a form of writing in which every word counts, a kind of poetry not essentially different from the language of mathematics.’<sup>57</sup> The basic function of the language of numbers is to accurately represent what the figures amount to. It is, perhaps, such a pointed and precise representational relation that Valéry sought to find. Mathematical language is then approached essentially as coded communication and as another form of discourse.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, this enables an

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<sup>53</sup> Broadcasted by BBC3: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/freethinking/2008/festival-events/event01/>

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion on Wittgenstein’s ‘private language’ see Brooke Lundquist, “Wittgenstein and Aesthetics: What is the Language of Art?” Gustavus Adolphus College, 1999. <http://gustavus.edu/academics/philosophy/Brooke.html>

<sup>55</sup> In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein explains in regards to ‘private language’: ‘The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language.’ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 75.

<sup>56</sup> Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Brian Stimpson, “The Writing ‘I’: Subject, Voice and Language in the work of Paul Valéry” (paper presented at the Roehampton Institute Inaugural Lecture, London, March 20, 1995), 16.

<sup>58</sup> An objection to Wittgenstein’s concept of private language may be that although its nature suggests a notion external to coded expression, Wittgenstein still names it ‘language’.



interpretative approach to a language created and formed primarily in order to make culmination and conclusion possible.

Postmodern literature is often characterized by heteroglossia and the merging of different languages. In *JPod*, different voices become interrelated and interweaved, sometimes under the wider system of the World Wide Web, sometimes through the technology of telecommunication, and occasionally through personal interaction. This use of numerical language could be approached as the incorporation of a different communicational code and in compliance to the heteroglotic and hybrid nature of the postmodern novel. What is distinctive in *JPod*, however, is the manner in which this different, mathematical language appears in the text. Numerical figures come into view framed within pages; boards with lists of numbers cover extensive parts of the body of the text. This compact and collective depiction of figures produces images of numbers. As an image, the impression of mathematical language undermines the stance of the numerical unit as an accurate correlative of an item. Despite the fixity of the numerical unit, appearances of numbers as images invite interpretation. These images of numbers allow multiple perceptions of a coded language that has inherent in its nature notions of accurate representation.

For the characters in *JPod*, mathematics and the language of technology are intrinsic to establishing and facilitating communication. The JPoders' friendship is generated by a common level of understanding mathematical relations. When Evil Mark hands out copies with the 8,363 prime numbers between 10,000 and 100,000, he invites his colleagues to participate in a game of locating the non-prime number he has embedded in the list. The full listing of the 8,364 numbers takes up the next 23 pages of the novel. 'In less than five minutes I won' says Ethan.<sup>59</sup> Variations of the

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<sup>59</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 256.

game include the replacement of the number zero, with the capital letter 'O'.<sup>60</sup> The testing of mathematical knowledge sets the ground on which JPoders become connected. The exchange and understanding of logical relations typifies their discourse and validates their affiliation. What is illustrated in the 23 pages of the 8,363 prime numbers is a representation of a mental model, which aims for participation in a play. The exercise suggests that there is reward in playing along and 'reading' the numbers. However, the numbers could remain 'unreadable', as the significance of the numerical play may stay latent. Unlike the keen JPoders, some of the reading audience may proceed to hastily skip these pages. But how much difference is there between appreciating the function of the numbers and skimming through these parts of the text? What is common to both options is the undeniable encounter with a different communicational code. For the reader who does not participate in this game, the question remains of whether something fundamental has been overlooked. This concern implies that the numerical image conceals the means of recovering an end, completion and some sense of rigidity or even, perhaps, purity. The numerical image appears to gesture towards the seeking of some truth which is in danger of remaining 'unreadable', overlooked, or lost. Is, then, the play of numbers in the text an indication of nostalgia for Classical ideals or pure representation? Is the image of numbers a representation of simulacrum or of a labyrinth? To answer these questions, the benefits of the numerical play should be reviewed.

Evil Mark offers a reward for winning the game: the prize is a merchandize item from the cartoon series *Family Guy*. The reference to the series may allude to the promise of comical effects, laughter and pleasure, but the fact that the 'trophy' is a collectable statuette piece restricts the benefits of the reward to the contentment

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 436-463.

arising from acquiring an object. Pleasure is thus materialized. Furthermore, apart from the playfulness in the course of games and the enrichment of product collections, no other enjoyment is suggested in *JPod*. Lyotard finds that in the postmodern condition this lack of pleasure is related to the problem of representation. He proposes that what the postmodern amounts to is that which:

in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia of the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, *not in order to enjoy them* [my italics] but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>61</sup>

What is communicated and emphasized through the numerous pages of numbers in *JPod* is precisely that sense of the unrepresentable which numerical codes and language are meant to facilitate. If ‘fault lies with language’ then language will always point to something unattainable.<sup>62</sup> The conveyance of numbers as images is essentially an attempt to impart the elements and conditions that constitute identity. Playing the game is to ‘play’ with the idea that pure representation is possible. This would be the game’s reward and any pleasure out of such a ‘play’ would be, in that sense, masturbatory and autoerotic.

In Ethan’s case, the reading of the list of numbers does display some excitement. He explains how he managed to win this game:

When I taped the prime numbers to my cubicle wall and looked at them from a distance, I could see darker and lighter patches within the body of the text that formed interesting shapes and patterns. I bet

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<sup>61</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 82.

if I took time to format the numbers correctly, I could see some sort of hitherto never-before-noticed magical numerical pattern that would allow me to solve the formula for generating prime numbers once and for all. I mentioned this to Cowboy. All he said was, “Maybe, but what if it turns out that the numbers form a kind of Magic Eye image, and when your brain resolves it, you see a goat walking on its hind legs, drinking from a horn full of blood?”

Scotch *that* idea.<sup>63</sup>

The reference to this man-goat clearly evokes mythical images. If the imagery is viewed as pagan, then it alludes to the deity of Pan, the guardian of shepherds and god of horn music, lust, pleasure and masturbation, who inspires excitement and is responsible for the fear encountered in lonely places (*panic*). The pagan imagery emerging through a numerical setting proposes the ‘security’ of correlative precision in the language of numbers as questionable. If the image of numbers in the text is there to propose and support analogical and factual thinking, the insinuation of pagan imagery, deriving from mathematical relations, suggests that numerical reciprocal thinking is impossible in the postmodern condition. In regards to Ethan and the JPoders, the image may suggest that despite the (mathematical) language they use to establish a common referent, the nature of their work as computer game designers initiates a reading of figures in a manner that would allow them to recreate imaginative associations and a narrative. If their creative language is the language of numbers, then an approach which would seek to recover an ultimate truth, resolutions, closure or purity would prevent ‘play’.

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<sup>63</sup> Douglas Coupland, *JPod*, 280.

Another aspect in Ethan's description is that of numbers forming a Magic Eye image. The Magic Eye raises the question of whether its function is to enable looking into a different reality or accessing a different mode of perception, or if it just reflects the onlooker's gaze. If the Magic Eye is thought of as reflective, then it might also be deemed as narcissistic. Wallace Stevens writes in *The Necessary Angel* that Narcissus:

sought out his image everywhere because it was the principle of his nature to do so and, to go a step beyond that, because it was the principle of his nature, as it is of ours, to expect to find pleasure in what he found. Narcissism, then, involves something beyond the prime sense of the word. It involves, also, this principle, that as we seek out our resemblances we expect to find pleasure in doing so; that is to say, in what we find. So strong is that expectation that we find nothing else.<sup>64</sup>

As Hartman suggests, the representation of the artistic identity inevitably confronts the artist with himself. As the self seeks to emerge and assume an identity it becomes easy to rest on established forms (in this case, numerical language or mythical imagery). In this way and through what Hartman calls the 'inevitability of self-assertion', the artist seeks to reconcile the object with a representation of the self.<sup>65</sup> Yet in Ethan's description the possibility of perceiving a pagan imagery through the Magic Eye is not deemed as pleasurable and Ethan's determination to 'Scotch *that* idea' surely proposes that the function of the Magic Eye is not narcissistic.

Of course, Ethan's Magic Eye could be considered not as reflectional, but as a construction that enables a different mode of perception. What needs to be questioned then is what it is that the Magic Eye allows Ethan to see. Such inquiry is obviously

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<sup>64</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 79-80.

<sup>65</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 258.

teleological in nature, since it suggests that a final design does indeed exist. If the purpose of the Magic Eye is to liberate the human eye in order to grant pure representation, then its nature would be to elucidate the perception of a core and to unfold *parousia* and convey the appearance of an idea. If the Magic Eye does not enact the manifestation of identity, is it symbolic of a wish to reach conclusive ends? The play with numbers would seem to suggest such an end-directed fixation. Yet such a definitive drive would also imply a sense of nostalgia for a world that has *telos*, a story that has an ending. The suggestion of a nostalgic wish for a structure leading to a final percept underestimates the overall disrupting and precipitous effect the incorporation of numbers has in the text and it would also disregard the impression of *JPod*'s incisive final words: 'Play again? Y/N'.<sup>66</sup> These questions are integral components in conceptualizing the problem of representation in the postmodern novel. David Punter writes:

So we might say that the postmodern is, has been, that which resists enucleation; for to enucleate would be already to act upon the assumption that there is a text behind a text, that here is an 'essence' to be extracted. But what is the 'essence' of the word 'enucleate'? The meanings offered by the dictionary have fallen into desuetude, and no other, contemporary ones, are offered to us; but enucleation does have a precise reference, still in contemporary specialised usage but not considered worthy – or sufficiently 'cleansed' – to warrant inclusion in the dictionary. It refers to the act whereby psychotics remove their own eyes.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 555.

<sup>67</sup> David Punter, "e-textuality: Authenticity after the Postmodern", *Critical Quarterly: Authenticity*, 43. 2 (2001): 85.

Ethan's image of the Magic Eye generated by numerical units is not nostalgic for the appearance of an 'essence' (often related to tradition or history), although it recognizes the possibility of such manifestation. Here, recognition is not wistful, nor does the assumption of an occult grand narrative offer gratification or ease. According to Hartman, the figures or symbols of the artist's choice will always 'point to a lack: to something used up or lost or not sufficiently "present". They do not, in short, imitate so much as test (feel out) a desired mode of being.'<sup>68</sup> In Ethan's case and in the case of the postmodern condition this 'feeling out' may reach to the employment of different modes of expression (numbers and images), but it also becomes an esoteric stretch. As inner search, Hartman's 'testing' or 'feeling out' verges on the self-inflicted violent act of enucleation noted by Punter.

Indeed, *JPod* could have been a very sinister novel, with its themes of a contemporary mundane life, drug abuse, sweatshops and murder. Yet *JPod*'s tone is humorous and amusing. What 'saves' this text is that the sense of struggle and clash emerges visibly.<sup>69</sup> It is only through an agitation derived from the imposition of images of numbers that a sense of disturbance or violence can be communicated. To perceive such violence directly would be enucleating.

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<sup>68</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Hartman writes: 'By calling this book *Saving The Text* I do not imply a religious effort in the ordinary sense: the allusion is to the well-known concept of "saving the appearances" (*sozein ta phenomena*) and my title suggests that we are still endeavouring to convert thinking to the fact that texts exist.' Hartman, *Saving The Text*, xv.

## 2.6. Image and Letters.

Initials, abbreviations, sporadic rendering of letters, and the use of unfamiliar alphabets make their appearance persistently in *JPod*. A repeated feature is the employment of unusual fonts to suggest different intonation. Ethan often experiments with the appearance and image of words in order to explore their effect and visual expression. He suggests, at one point, that ‘documents are thirty-four percent more boring when presented in the Courier font’ and he proceeds to list and contrast phrases written in the regular font of the text to the same phrases written in Courier.<sup>70</sup> He then shares this concern with Kaitlin, who is quick to suggest that “[i]n order for something to become boring, it has to be interesting to begin with.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, while Ethan’s two vertical lists are composed with the juxtapositions of technological language, such as ‘Message validation’ or ‘XML serialization’, Kaitlin’s lists of phrases derive from a different idiom. She offers, among others:

brain lice	brain lice
cream of hitchhiker soup	cream of hitchhiker soup
sun-bloated babysitter	sun-bloated babysitter <sup>72</sup>

The play with fonts is clearly exploring the suggestive influence of the image of words. The reader is invited not only to read but to ‘see’ what it is that Ethan finds boring, while Kaitlin’s list is intended to emphasize the words’ transgression. What is common to both lists is the testing out of whether typical associations still stand when the image of a word alters.

Experimentation with the depiction and suggestiveness of particular fonts is given plenty of textual space in *JPod*. Words appear represented as spectacles with

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<sup>70</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 243.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 243.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 243.



special attention paid to their graphological representation. This attention to the appearance and writing of the letter, as expressive of character, identity and sensuality, is highlighted when Ethan narrates:

Before I forget, Bree came up with this new trick – how to create your name if you become a stripper. Basically, just figure out the least expensive form of sugar or sweetness you ate today...

*"McSasses "*

*"Sweet 'N Low "*

*"Vanilla Wafer "*

*"Tang "*

*"Brown Sugar "*

*"The Doublemint Twins "*

*"Cling Peaches "*

*"Cinnamon "*

My own stripper name is "M&M."<sup>73</sup>

The suggested image of erotic dancers, who undress in front of onlookers, becomes represented in the text with the framing and employment of a different, more enticing and excessive font. Emphasis becomes placed on the visual charge of the image of the names. As character becomes promoted through written word, the font punctuates the adaptation of the role of a stripper. What is implied here is that the meaning and evocative nature of words is influenced by their appearance, representation and the reader's perception. In other words, the word's stimulation is influenced by its conveyance. The seductiveness of stripping is clearly related not only to the

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<sup>73</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 488-9.

suggestion of sexuality but also to the appeal of undressing. Here, what is alluring is the written word. The appeal becomes communicated through the elaborate framing and font of the letter. If, then, in the exotic dance the hope is to see the girl undressed, in *JPod* the wish appears to be to ‘unwrap’ the word from its immediate and typical meaning associations and to remove it from relational assumptions. The expectation is that, with the end of this ‘dance’, we will witness the word naked, bare from its excessive associations of meaning and for what it is.<sup>74</sup>

In the essay “Fate of Reading” and in the first section titled ‘The Romance of the Letter’, Hartman introduces the analogy of reading and ‘girl-watching’.<sup>75</sup> He proposes that one can read in a manner similar to a man watching girls from afar, rather than actually becoming engaged with the object of his eyes. In *JPod*, the intentional framing of words and letters in the white canvas of the page prompts a similar act of watching rather than instigating engrossing reading. In his essay Hartman moves to explore the ‘*thaumaturgic* impact’ of reading and writing, noting that the historical spread of literacy has brought along a hopeful expectation of a panacea and miracle; the hope of revelation, overt meaning and access to knowledge that can alter perception and reality alike. Hartman continues by suggesting that those who adhere to the belief that communication is impossible (and therefore a dream) are secret utopians, in search of a better and larger language system. He notes three paradoxes inherent in this ‘dream of communication’: technologically taught language ‘may be contaminating the word and contributing to its demise’; a plentitude of media actually complicates understanding; and finally, ‘expression may not even lead to

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<sup>74</sup> As a noun, rather than a verb, ‘strip’ signifies the negative of the photographic picture. Also see Roland Barthes, “Striptease,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Cape, 1972), 84-87 and Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Cape, 1967).

<sup>75</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 248.

catharsis'.<sup>76</sup> *JPod* often appears to adhere to the dream of communication, particularly since it searches and employs different language systems. While all three of Hartman's paradoxes occur in the text, Hartman's last observation regarding the wish for cathartic expression appears intrinsic to the consideration of the 'seductive' letter in *JPod*. Hartman proposes that communication is not cathartic, as redemptive expression, because there are too many things communicated in utterance. In *JPod*, the naming and suggestion of the exotic dancers' undressing leads to the consideration of the naked figure. But there is nothing cathartic to be found in either women's stripping or the 'stripping' of words, since what remains is not a purified, refined or chaste figure. The dance of an exotic dancer may be stimulating because of its suggestiveness, which is not finalized in view of the naked body. Similarly, the 'dance' of the letters in the pages of *JPod* creates an image whose meaning cannot be finalized or fixed in the reader's visual field. In the sight of the bare body, associations remain, and the constant use of fanciful typesets seems to be a visual representation of this notion in *JPod*. *JPod*'s attention always returns to the word. 'We seek to de-realize' writes Hartman and this quest for de-realization becomes the reader's indifferent 'girl-watching' or *JPod*'s postmodern effect; because not to engage with such a text and to rest in its visual field means to uphold the hope of catharsis.<sup>77</sup>

In *JPod* letters often appear sporadically spread on a given textual space, as if to suggest a jigsaw that the reader is called to solve. Page 510 is dedicated to the spread of seemingly random letters, which appear capitalized, small, in pairs or single. Yet,

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<sup>76</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 250.

<sup>77</sup> Wolfe suggests that Johns' artwork was 'converting pieces of everyday communication – flags and numbers – into art objects ... and thereby *de*-literazing them! Were they content or were they form? They were neither!' Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (London: Bantam Books, 1975), 76-77. Also consider: 'Symbols then are language trying to be more naked (unmediated) than language. Yet they cannot be more, ever, than flowers of language. Carnations incarnate.' Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 264.

with a closer look, this image of arbitrary letters slowly reveals the formulation of an obscene word, the wording of which is considered improper and offensive. Nevertheless, the reader may now not only read, but also utter with particular intonation this word, since the separation of its composing letters and the occasional use of capitalization implies a certain pronunciation. In *JPod* unusual fonts are regularly employed to suggest different intonations.<sup>78</sup> At this particular instance, however, it is significant that the codifying of a scandalous word takes place. Does the disjointing of the word emphasize its offensiveness or is it an attempt to perceive the word beyond its regular, vulgar denotations? In 'The Fate of Reading' Hartman notes that an overwhelming excess of realism results in the reader being left indifferent, immune and unaffected by the word. In the section 'A Saving Scandal' Hartman continues to argue not for the maintenance of a scandal in the text, but rather about the 'saving' of meanings that language constantly reveals and retains. Language is, in that respect, 'scandalous'; it advances a 'saving', the upholding and continuation of its 'magical' nature. The image of the abusive word in *JPod* does render a sense of frustration but the playfulness with which the word is portrayed implies a certain detachment or disenchantment. The fragmentation of the word appears emphatic of the 'scandalous' nature of utterance. Hartman finds language scandalizing and 'magical'.<sup>79</sup> Here, it seems that Coupland attempts to illustrate that magic and formulate an image of the 'scandalous' nature of the word, by providing space (the blank space in between the letters) for the 'other'. The fact that the particular word is obscene becomes irrelevant.

Starting with the title of this novel, Coupland consistently projects letter characters outside their usual referential context. In the story, the letter *J* of *JPod*

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<sup>78</sup> Coupland, *JPod*, 488.

<sup>79</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, 262.

refers to the first initial of each of the JPoders' last name. As an indication of the surnames, *J* relates to lineage and the paternal name and it is suggestive of tradition and history. If *J* implies the name of the father, it also echoes the name of Jesus, the Word of God on earth who, according to the Christian tradition, originates and establishes language.<sup>80</sup> The problematic that arises for the relation of *J* to the Christian tradition (*J* as Jesus) is of mortal speech attending to God by means of His gift of language. Equally, *J* could signify Jehovah and the name of God in the Hebrew Bible. The problematic that the name of YHWH originates (*J* as Jehovah) is the impossibility of knowing how to pronounce the name of God. 'Pod' then, could be understood as the Word of God. As 'case' or 'shell', the word 'pod' not only protects but also implies a need for the shell to be broken open. In that sense, 'pod' is like every word, a container of letters and a vessel of meanings. To break the pod, fragment the word and present the space in between letters is to illustrate the 'opening up' of the word, which, like Pandora's Box, can set loose all evils and hope contained.

## **2.7. Conclusion: Debris and Slippage in the United Scrapes.**

While images of letters and numbers fragment and disrupt the narrative in *JPod*, it is these same images that open up interpretation. By merging and fusing discourses and languages in its reproductions, images in *JPod* act also conjunctively. Here, images are not used as in Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, where the narrator justifies the text's illustrations as cathartic abjection of the plentitude of images that come to occupy his mind. In *JPod*, images are not presented as the disposing of 'junk'. Nevertheless, images of scrapes and waste do occupy the narrative. As Andrew Tate notes, Coupland seems obsessed by debris:

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<sup>80</sup> See The Bible, John 1: 1-14.

Douglas Coupland is captivated by rubbish, its possible uses and its plural connotations. Motifs of household garbage, environmental pollution and technological junk are everywhere in his fiction and visual art – the substance of his work is frequently constructed from broken things, forgotten concepts, obsolete inventions and the many ‘time-expired’, disposable items that we routinely ditch.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, in *JPod* it is representations of debris which formulate images and permeate the narrative: used out concepts, junk e-mails, serial numbers, abbreviations, discarded packaging, Ethan’s worn out, second-hand clothes and even heroin (‘junk’). All these saturate the text. Essentially, what images of products, numbers and letters amount to in *JPod* is a reproduction of the junk of Western civilization and a representation of the compiled debris of our generation. Reproduction of waste in the text facilitates the representation of the unrepresentable; namely, the representation of what Western civilization chooses to disregard. These are the used up and disposed materials that interweave the web of the text.

*JPod*’s network, of course, is full of ‘holes’. The indifferent tone of the novel sets the constant slippage of images in the text and the lack of focus or purpose for *JPod*’s characters conditions the reader’s ‘slipping’ on images of waste. While this fascination with debris binds the narrative, it is not therapeutic. Images, as composed by language, further disable the sustaining of any particular meaning. Hartman finds that, in Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*,

There is a sense of debris, which is the obverse of awareness of the treacherous flow (“glissement”) of language. Time, though, is not against language (or vice versa) but coterminous with it: to be in the

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<sup>81</sup> Tate, *Douglas Coupland*, 73.

one is to be in the other. If, then, the page fractures itself with blank spaces and inserts, it is because God created the world not by the logos but by the slip of the tongue. There is no single unifying logos: there is, at most, a divine parataxis imitated alike by medieval jongleur and modern grammatologist.<sup>82</sup>

Coupland has often been referred to as the writer of 'our times' and he has repeatedly suggested that he wants his novels to be about the 'here' and 'now' of contemporary reality.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the effects of the electronic space and its use in the text propose the collapse of distinctions of place and time. As Hartman suggests, it is perhaps such a contemporaneity that confronts the reader of *JPod* with the 'slipping of the tongue' and the impossibility of language to accurately correlate spectacle with word. Meaning becomes continuously displaced in *JPod*, and the space between letters, numbers and the wording of packaging in its representation of images, are fractures that sustain this sense of sliding through and an avoidance of closure.

In 1981, in an article for the *New York Times*, Hartman proposes that the 'blurring of boundaries is not a good thing in itself. Promiscuous or hybrid literary forms can easily degenerate, yet such forms are the crucible from which new and discriminating achievements have traditionally come.'<sup>84</sup> Hartman's reservation about the obscuring of boundaries does not come without the realization that it is such thresholds that promote literary advances. In that same year, *Saving The Text* was published. In its introduction Hartman suggests: 'To call a text literary is to *trust* that

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<sup>82</sup> Hartman, *Saving The Text*, 7. 'Glissement' translates to sliding, slipping or gliding. It can also be thought of as the falling from a false step or as a geological landslide.

<sup>83</sup> 'The desire for a "here and now", fixed image or defining word, mystic portrait or identity – imposing story, is not dissociable, according to psychiatry, from family romance: the recognition scene is always a displaced or sublimated family scene. It is no different with the Christian scandal of the "Presence of the Word" (*logos spermatikos*) in the Immaculate Conception, or more precisely, in the Annunciation.' Hartman, *Saving The Text*, 107.

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "How Creative should Literary Criticism Be?" *New York Times*, April 1981.

it will make sense eventually, even though its quality of reference may be complex, disturbed, unclear. It is a way of “saving the phenomena” of words that are out of the ordinary or bordering on the nonsensical – that have no stabilized reference.’<sup>85</sup> Postmodern literature challenges and questions our trust that literature does indeed make sense. By destabilizing the signification of a word through altering its appearance, the postmodern text seems more concerned with the ‘presenting’ rather than the deciphering of representational issues. In 1996, in an interview with Stuart Barnett (*Geistersprache*), Hartman asserted that ‘each significant work of fiction or poem displaces perception. That is its power. It modifies perception and so, after it, we can’t think about things quite the same way as before’.<sup>86</sup> By projecting ‘phenomena’ and putting forward the presence of the word, *JPod* does not offer resolution to problems of representation but attests to the complexities of language. However complicated the word may appear its strands cannot be hidden, disposed of or smoothed over: ‘to be is to be seen.’<sup>87</sup> The de-realization of graphological representations and images of words alerts us to the fact that language reaches us already interpreted. Postmodern literature exposes this de-realization, not by attempting to restore ‘the real’ but by projecting the destabilization of what has come to compose the postmodern condition.

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<sup>85</sup> Hartman, *Saving The Text*, xxi.

<sup>86</sup> Stuart Barnett, “Geistersprache: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman.” *Connecticut Review*, 18 (1996): 21-38. Accessed: April 28th, 2008, <http://www.english.ccsu.edu/barnetts/hartman.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Benjamin in Hope”, *Critical Inquiry: Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*, 25. 2 (1999): 350.



## Chapter 3

### Calicoes of Echoes

Ye Voices, and ye Shadows  
And Images of voice – to hound and horn  
From rocky steep and rock-bestudded meadows  
Flung back, and; in the sky's blue caves, reborn –  
On with your pastime! Till the church-tower bells  
A greeting give of measured glee;  
And milder echoes from their cells  
Repeat the bridal symphony.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter focuses on Mark Z. Danielewski's debut novel *House of Leaves* (2000) and associates the text's emphasis on the sound of words with Hartman's interpretative approach. As I explain here, Hartman understands reading as attending to the echoes of words. The first section explores the relation of the concepts of visibility and sound and examines the ways in which the ocular and auricular come to be associated in the text. The second part of the chapter examines how Hartman's interpretative methods can inform the reading of a text characteristic of a typographical fluidity that challenges our reading. "Topography and Typography: Hartman's 'Spot Syndrome' and the Problem of Orientation", focuses on the problem of direction in both Hartman's critical contribution and the text under examination. This section concentrates on the trope of house as it appears in *House of Leaves* in order to discuss the significance of place as related to the typography of the text. The final section of

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, "On the Power of Sound", *Last Poems, 1821-1850*. Ed. Jared Curtis, Apryl Lea Denny-Ferris and Jillian Heydt Stevenson (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

the chapter examines whether teleological acts of interpretation are possible in a postmodern text such as *House of Leaves*.

### **3.1. Sound and the Lack of Visibility in *House of Leaves*.**

Danielewski's debut novel *House of Leaves* became a bestseller. The novel's popularity can be attributed partly to its gradual online release prior to its official, full publication, which attracted a cult of followers, and partly to Danielewski's association with the work of his sister, singer and songwriter, Annie Decatur Danielewski, a.k.a. Poe. Poe released her album *Haunted* in the same year and the two projects were received as the result of a sister/brother collaboration. Both works share similar structural devices and themes, with each project openly making use of and quoting the other. The two simultaneous releases followed the death of the siblings' father, Tad Danielewski, a Polish avant-garde film director. It is perhaps safe to speculate that this personal loss had its influence on Danielewski's novel becoming poignantly centred on a story about the discovery of an uncanny documentary film and on Poe using in her album tape recordings with her father's voice.<sup>2</sup> The sharing of this personal loss becomes transmitted in the creative sharing of the siblings' projects. Poe describes her contribution to her brother's novel and his input on her work:

I'd written a number of songs that were inspired by bits of his writing and conversely, pieces of Mark's novel had sprung out of songs that I had written. It was slowly becoming clear that my album and his book were in fact 2 parts of the same project. We were telling the same story in two different mediums and before "Haunted" was completed each song on the album was footnoted to 3 different narratives in the book.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Poe utilized her father's voice from cassette recordings for the album. *Haunted* established Poe as an inventive, unconventional and avant-garde artist.

<sup>3</sup> <http://realpoe.ning.com/page/about-poe>

Poe's perception of the two projects is that of a yin yang relationship. Mark Danielewski's novelist venture appears as a contrast to Poe's music endeavours: oral expression, in the form of music, counterpoints the process of writing and literature. This clear opposition between the spoken and written word allows for the consideration of the two projects as related to one another, at least in antithetical terms. Poe's comments reveal her understanding of the two projects as integral in completing each other. Yet, despite Poe's homogenous understanding of the two projects, in their dialogic exchange, song and fiction remain in polarity, as the two heterogonous parts of an artistic enterprise.

The many ways in which the two projects communicate and correspond emerge in each work. *House of Leaves* is clearly affected by its 'sister', making use not only of *Haunted* but also plenty of other references to music. The foreword of the novel reads 'This is not for you' and could be inspired by the refrain of the song "Not for you" by the American band Pearl Jam, where the exact phrase is continuously repeated in the chorus.<sup>4</sup> The section of the novel that is titled 'The Navidson Record' begins with another preface: '*Muss es sein?*' is the first part of Beethoven's famous 'Muss es sein?.. es muss sein!'<sup>5</sup> A quote of the first line of The Beatles' song "A day in the life": '*I saw a film today, oh boy...*' appears at the start of the same section.<sup>6</sup> Such intertextual references relate narrative discourse to music but they also impart an emphatic sense of the division and differences between the written (*écriture*) and sonic (utterance) qualities of language. The focus becomes the written word and so in *House of Leaves*, references to music raise the reader's awareness of the text's lack of sonic qualities.

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<sup>4</sup> Pearl Jam, 'Not for you' from the album *Vitalogy* (1994).

<sup>5</sup> The comment 'Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!' (Must it be? It must be! It must be!) appears in Ludwig van Beethoven's *String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135*.

<sup>6</sup> The Beatles' "A Day in the Life" appears in the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* (1967). Also, consider the use of the word 'record' in the title of the section, in musical terms.

*House of Leaves* also exposes the antithetical interconnection of the written word and the visual world.<sup>7</sup> Attending to the object of the reader's eyes is inevitable not only because of the possibly off-putting size of the book, but above all by the typography of the text, which fluctuates from one extreme to another. The unconventional page layout, with pages containing but a few words, text appearing upside-down, multiple font variation, the angled appearance of text on the corners of pages, in dense blocks or columns, mid-sentence breaks and the use of pictures, are just a few of the challenges presented by the text. Danielewski's mode of writing appears similar to Coupland's and his perception of writing as an expression of his visual thinking, where each of his novels is 'seen' as a different picture. Both authors attend to the challenge of representing optical stimulation by using the form and appearance of the letter but while in *JPod* Coupland employs graphic representations in order to construct the identities of his characters, in *House of Leaves*, Danielewski uses typographical experimentation to represent the workings of the minds of his characters and their subconscious, recreating, in the space of the page, the psyche of his protagonists.<sup>8</sup> Considering Danielewski's graduate studies in Cinema and Television at the University of Southern California, which followed his degree in English Literature at Yale, one may conclude that Danielewski's novel indicates an interest in issues of visibility, language and representation. Some commentators have approached *House of Leaves* as an exemplification of 'visual writing', writing that translates what is perceived by the eye into something visual in order to convey apparent realities. The text uses the space of the page to render what the eye meets and imitates movement in physical space, by arranging and positioning sentences, letters or words. What is seen is not simply described but delivered in the text through the physical appearance of words within the space of the page. Still, Danielewski seems more

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<sup>7</sup> Here, by 'visual' I refer only to what is sensually received by the eyes.

<sup>8</sup> See "Chapter 2: Image in the Postmodern Text" for Coupland's development of characters in *JPod*.

than aware of the subjectivity of personal perception and his use of typography appears employed for an esoteric elucidation.

The elaborate arrangement of words in *House of Leaves* reflects the complex nature of its characters but it also influences the reading of the text. The structure of the novel constantly displaces the focus of the reader and confuses the order of reading. Furthermore, with the narrative focusing on the theme of visibility, the sense of deciphering some clarity or direction becomes pressing. *House of Leaves*' central story is that of 'The Navidson Record'. 'The Navidson Record' is an old man's narration about the recovery of a film recording that took place during an exploring expedition. Zampanò, the old man figure who transcribes the events, dialogues, movements and sounds recorded by the one camera, turns the visual into written word by experimenting with peculiar arrangements of the text which mimic the proceedings of the film. The challenges that Zampanò faces with this project are twofold. Firstly, the film he transcribes is in its largest part recorded in absolute darkness and secondly, Zampanò is blind.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the organization and framing of his transcriptions and comments become dictated by the lack of visibility: Zampanò's lost sight and the nocturnal sense of the film place an emphasis on sound which affects the structure of his narration. Apart from the intriguing layout displayed, Zampanò's written words acquire an unusual or intensified sonic appeal, necessitated by the simulation of tenebrosity.

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<sup>9</sup> The character of Zampanò echoes that of Oedipus but it bears more resemblances to the ancient Greek prophet Tiresias. Tiresias was allegedly blinded by the gods for revealing their secrets but one version of the mythical stories explaining his blindness attributes his lost sight to a curse from Athena. When Tiresias accidentally encounters Athena bathing naked, the goddess punishes him with blindness, but after Tiresias's mother imploring, Athena compensates the curse by cleaning his ears and thus granting him the prophetic ability of understanding the singing of birds. Zampanò appears as the sole figure that has the ability to make sense of the uncanny events transcribed in 'The Navidson Record'.

Orientation, within the film recording, Zampanò's text and the entire novel, becomes possible only by attending to the echoes of words.<sup>10</sup>

With the visual (and narrative) range impeded or utterly lost, the concern with orientation becomes critical. In *House of Leaves*, the search for a means of orientation raises questions about direction, location and position. Orientation entails the examination of the concepts of space and sound. Echo is determined by these two parameters and in *House of Leaves*, the concept of echo appears in both figurative and thematic terms. Figuratively, echo appears in the story as the only variable that provides orientation. Thematically, the concept of the echo of words offers a fertile ground for a discussion of the intertextual and dialogic elements of the text. The novel's engagement with music and the visual arts in such an experimental fashion and the variety of references and quotations that synthesize the text not only define the novel as postmodern; they affirm the text as shaped by other texts, narrative discourses and other real or apparently fabricated quotations. The focus of the examination in this chapter is to explore the interpretative resonance of words. This investigation aims to attend not only to the recognition of intertextual and polyphonic elements but also to the particular use of language, its melodious orchestration and emanating echoes, the echoes of emerging meanings through the text's playful compositions. The discussion that follows will not engage with exploring the employment or the dynamics of the use of different artistic expressions in the text by setting them in antithesis (the visual vs. transcription or the oral vs. the written).<sup>11</sup> Instead, this chapter seeks to examine the manner in which representation and

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<sup>10</sup> 'The Navidson Record' is a complicated collection which centres around the transcription of the film, but includes extended insertions of critical views, commentary, interviews, references and quotations from various sources (Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick, Ken Burns, Harold Bloom, Anne Rice and Jacques Derrida, to name a few), who appear to have commented on the rescued documentary.

<sup>11</sup> I believe that Poe's dialectic understanding of *House of Leaves* and *Haunted* as the two parts of one project (the latter representing sound and the former writing) is reductive. Despite recognizing the influences in each other's work, Poe's apprehension does not take into consideration the sonic nature of the written word and its effects on interpretation.

typographical experimentation with language influence the emergence of meaning and our reading of *House of Leaves*.

To recapitulate, the two projects of the Danielewski siblings provide the preliminary outline for the consideration of the interconnection of written language and sound. In *House of Leaves*, the issue of the conjuncture of the written and sonic aspects of the word becomes more pressing. The bold experimentation with typography identifies the text as postmodern; moreover, in seeking to emphasize the placement, movement and reverberations of words, *House of Leaves* appears as the result of a characteristic postmodern struggle: in a contemporary world that is characterized by a flux of images, print, information and a cacophony of voices, is it possible to trace meaning or, otherwise, ‘listen’ to the echoes of words? The lack of visibility raised by the themes of darkness and blindness emphasizes the questions of direction and orientation. Still, Danielewski is aware that there is not one right way of following the word or a final destination to this journey. The mazelike patterns and intricate paths that this text portrays with its graphical complexities testify to the complexities involved in arrival at a final point. *House of Leaves* appears as a labyrinth, in the sense of a maze, the inner ear and as a loudspeaker. The echoes of *House of Leaves* continue to sound in its readership, affirming the performative nature of the text.

### **3.2. Hartman and the Dispersing of Meaning.**

Any examination of the resonance of literary language can benefit significantly from Hartman’s interpretative approach, which focuses on the dissemination of meaning. Hartman’s interest in the sounds of words permeates his writings and becomes the focal point of his methodological approach. His interest in the relation of sound and meaning is partly attributed to his focus on poetry. In *The Unmediated Vision*, Hartman draws on Valéry’s ‘The

Sleeper' to note that in the poem each line and stanza may stand on its own and yet the meaning of the poem is continually amplified.

The suspension of sense by sound seems to increase in each stanza until we reach the climax of the third: "Dormeuse, amas doré d'ombres et d'abandons." There is such a vocal joy in this verse that no one would be surprised to find "do-re-mi." Yet to say of this line "here sense is suspended by sound" is only approximate. If its sense were merely "do-re-mi" we would not bother about it. The meaning, though retarded, is finally reinforced by what at first seems an entirely *arbitrary* effect of sound. These words are given a surprising resonance as if we heard them echoing not through the ordinary air, but through an unusual medium, such as water, though far more mysterious. The idea therefore arises, stimulated by Valéry himself, that poetry is, by essence, incantation.<sup>12</sup>

Hartman's concern is not so much the lyricism of poetical language but its effects on the form and meaning of a poem. In *The Unmediated Vision*, Hartman finds that Wordsworth's poetic style and his use of repetition in "Tintern Abbey" resurfaces unaccented words 'as if a wave (of sound or sea) were bringing closer a far-away sound and redispersing it in its echo.'<sup>13</sup> For Hartman, the concept of reverberations of echoes becomes a metaphor used to refer not only to the multiplicity of meanings but also to the continuity of a concept throughout a poem. This becomes clearer in Hartman's discussion of Hopkins, where he suggests that the poet uses combinations of similar sounding or grammatical words to convey elements of meaning which would be concealed if the words were considered singularly. Hartman argues that

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 101. It is worth pointing out that rather than 'do, re, mi', the common Western system of notating music is that of 'a,b,c'; the codification of music and language share the same systematization.

<sup>13</sup> Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 24.



Hopkins's poetry carries and multiplies 'the sound of one word in the next, like a series of accelerated explosions.'<sup>14</sup> At once striking and progressive, the movement in Hopkins' poetry is a dispersing of echoes of meaning. Hartman's readings of other poets, more notably that of Christopher Smart, also deliberate around ideas of sound. Hartman's attention to alliteration, assonance, word play and the effects these evoke, invokes new ways of informing the interpretation of literary texts.

Hartman's interest in sound patterns permeates his criticism and other literary writings. In *Beyond Formalism*, Hartman suggests that words mediate the real.<sup>15</sup> If words are mediatory, then they cannot already possess multiple meanings. Hartman suggests that words do not hold but channel reverberations of meaning; they accommodate and transmit sense.<sup>16</sup> Hartman becomes uneasy when he considers a use of language that has lost its reverberating tones. In *Scars of the Spirit* he comments on contemporary communication:

Most of the time, unfortunately, we remain unaware of the lava of petrified metaphors that constitutes so much of daily language. Perhaps because words on the page, although meant for thoughtful absorption and reconsideration, must always reenter the pressured marketplace of ideas: chaotic debates where force of personality is often decisive. Too much air or constant public exposure asphyxiates those words, so they become fish gasping on the strand. In literature they refresh and move as quick as in the sea.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 38. Hartman suggests that words are not the agency for imitating reality. He also defines historical criticism as 'the relation of words to place of utterance' 39.

<sup>16</sup> An apparatus for such instrumentation is the telephone. With the telephone, the *phone* (voice) becomes transmitted over a distance to reach the other end (*tele*). Reception is the teleological fulfilment of the telephone. In interpretation and with written words, such a teleological realization is suspended.

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 8.

The fixed and preset expressions that arguably govern the majority of everyday speech may also saturate the written word, under the pressure of facilitating the establishment of authorial identity. While Hartman recognizes the danger of overexposure, which deadens the effects of the word, he remains faithful to the written word. For him, literature comes to resurrect and resurface the meaning associations that have faded away with overuse or abuse. The image of words swimming as fish in the sea raises some questions, however. What consequences does this free-floating of words have on the form of the text? Hartman's metaphor is clearly intended to emphasize the need for a more liberal and imaginative use of language. But by equating the literary text with the sea, Hartman appears to suggest that the literary text is, or needs to be, shapeless, amorphous and unstructured, in order for the free-floating of meaning to be possible.<sup>18</sup> The currents of Hartman's association of words and fish run deep and this is an example of Hartman's voice reaching the reader from beneath. Hartman's style echoes undercurrents of meaning that suggest the resurfacing of multiple possibilities of meaning.

Hartman's simile of the text as an amorphous mass of water is exemplified by *House of Leaves*. Danielewski's novel is centred on a house that is as fluent as water, and 'The Navidson Record' is a narration that attempts to deal logically with this uncanny irregularity. Will Navidson is an acclaimed photojournalist who moves into a new house in Virginia with his wife, Karen Green, a former fashion model, and their two children, Chad and Daisy. After a short trip to Seattle, the Navidson family returns to their new home and discovers inexplicable changes: where previously there was only a wall, a door appears, which leads

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<sup>18</sup> More can be said about the equating of words to fish: a theological reading would suggest that Hartman's metaphor is suggestive of the Ichthys (Ιχθϋς means 'fish' and is an acronym for 'Ιεσους Χριστος Θεου Ιος Σωτηρ': Jesus Christ God's Son Saviour). The symbolic use of the Ichthys as a reference to Jesus Christ is most probably inspired by the miracle of the feeding the five thousand. In the Jewish tradition, the fish is symbolic of abundance. Hartman is Jewish and so his metaphor may appear to propose the word as *Logos*, or the Word of God. John Schad writes in the introduction to *Queer Fish*: 'Christians, of course, have long identified with sea-life, ever since the fish was used as a secret Christian symbol; once, though, the Christian fish is Dover beached, it is a fish out of water, an odd or queer fish. And this strange, dripping-wet figure of a Christian keeps returning to the book. In this sense, the book is all at sea.' John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 4.

into a closet-like space; the hallway that led to the yard, now does not; the interior measurements of the house are larger than the external ones and the house appears to be continually expanding internally while remaining the same from the outside. When Will Navidson decides to explore this mystery, he calls on his estranged brother, Tom, his friend Billy Reston, Holloway Roberts, a 'professional hunter and explorer' and his two aids, Kirby 'Wax' Hook and Jed Leeder.<sup>19</sup> Tom Navidson takes charge of the radio communications during the explorations; Will's friend, Billy, is paralysed and in a wheelchair but manages to rescue Will from certain death in the maze. Holloway, a man that Billy describes as 'rock solid', arrives at the house armed and prepared but suffers a mental breakdown during the exploration.<sup>20</sup> Believing that the maze is the lair of a monster, Holloway becomes alienated as his mentality deteriorates and leaves the team to 'run off blind'.<sup>21</sup> Holloway ends up shooting at Will, 'Wax' and Jed, killing the latter, and finds himself alone and trapped due to the sudden and inexplicable changes of his surroundings. Sealed off within the house, Holloway films himself committing suicide. His body is never recovered as it becomes engulfed and consumed by darkness. The fluid and obscure insides of the house are approached as resembling a maze and yet the liquid walls that wave the path of the explorers give the impression of an expedition into uncharted oceans.<sup>22</sup>

During the explorations, Jed names the space revealed before entering the maze, the 'Anteroom', and Holloway calls the hallways of the maze 'the Great Hall'.<sup>23</sup> Zampanò describes the Anteroom and the Great Hall in relation to each other in Chapter X:

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Anchor, 2000), 80.

<sup>20</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>22</sup> '[K]nowledge is hot water on wool. It shrinks time and space.' Ibid. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 85. It is interesting that the chamber is named *Anteroom*, which echoes or can be mistaken for *Antiroom*; this perhaps signifies that as a waiting room the chamber acts as an *antenna*, rather than the *antithesis* of the space it introduces. Indeed, the Anteroom is where Tom and his radio communication equipment are based. However, in 'allowing' for communication, the Anteroom does become the antithesis of the Great Hall, where all communication is 'drowned'.

Of course, the Great Hall dwarfs even this chamber. As Holloway reported in Exploration #2, its span approaches one mile, making it practically impossible to illuminate. Instead the trio *slips* straight through the black, carefully marking their way with ample *fishing line*, until the way ahead suddenly reveals an even greater darkness, pitted in the centre of that immense, incomprehensible space.

In one photograph of the Great Hall, we find Reston in the foreground holding a flare, the light barely licking the ashen wall arising above him into inky oblivion, while in the background Tom stands surrounded by flares which just as ineffectually confront the impenetrable wall of nothingness looming around the Spiral Staircase.

As Chris Thayil remarks: “The Great Hall feels like the inside of some perpetual hull designed to travel *vast seas* never before observed in the world.”<sup>24</sup>

The pod of the Great Hall appears as a kind of an ark or fishing boat but it is itself as fluid and wavering as the space that it moves in/onto. More significantly, the vacillating nature of the space (the ‘ashen walls’ rising to ‘inky oblivion’) becomes reflected in the typographical variations that follow this quote. Chapter X introduces pages where single paragraphs appear either at the top, middle or bottom of the pages. These paragraphs become gradually reduced to sentences and then to single words, leaving the rest of the pages completely empty. The fluctuation of the house becomes mirrored in the typography of the text. Sentences follow climaxes of the story on the space and length of pages. Words appear to be singularly floating

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<sup>24</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 155. My italics. While the ‘slippage’ into the space implies a watery surface, the fishing line used suggests parallels with the story of the mythical monster Minotaur, which lived in the centre of the Cretan labyrinth and was fed each year with the lives of seven young men and seven girls from Athena. Theseus, (whose name roots from *thesmos* meaning ‘institution’) kills the bull-headed monster with the help of Ariadne, who offers him a ball of thread before he enters the maze, so he can retrace his way out.

on pages. This affects the nature of our reading, which accordingly becomes a process of ‘sailing’ through the pages, looking for connecting thread or ‘fishing net’ that can hold the text and its meaning together. Only, in *House of Leaves* words are as fish swimming in vast seas or, to echo Danielewski’s choice of simile from the title of the novel, leaves, floating and drifting in currents of air.

The unconventional typography found in ‘The Navidson Record’ pervades the entire text. The novel begins with the first-person narrative of Johnny Truant, a young man who discovers pieces of the manuscript of Zampanò’s research, after the elderly man’s death. As Johnny attempts to piece the transcription together, he becomes submerged and obsessed with the story of ‘The Navidson Record’ and the uncanny house it records. His determination to weave the text together produces a multilayered narrative mass of a very challenging format. Alternating between Johnny’s personal story and Zampanò’s transcripts, the text becomes fragmented and intercepted by footnotes, Braille, struck-through passages, unorthodox layout and a variety of fonts.<sup>25</sup> The more Johnny struggles to reconstruct Zampanò’s flow of language, the more he discovers about the unfixable nature of Navidson’s house and the more complicated the format of *House of Leaves* gets. Navidson’s house may then be thought of as a representation of the word, which is both a signification of meaning and yet remains undeterminable and somewhat magical. Similarly, *House of Leaves* may be regarded as representative of literary language, of the sea in which words move, according to Hartman’s metaphor, or of the air in which words reverberate. *House of Leaves* reproduces a dispersing of words and it becomes demonstrative of the amorphous, unstructured and vaporous nature of language suggested by Hartman. For Hartman, language is always an adequate mediation and, thus, typographical playfulness is not essential in affirming the polysemantic or magical

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<sup>25</sup> Johnny’s font is Courier, Zampanò’s font is Times, the Editors’ font is Bookman and Johnny’s mother, Pelafina, font in the last part of the book, which appears as a collection of letters (‘The Whalestoe Letters’), is Dante. Each font introduces a different narrator.

nature of language. In *House of Leaves* and in the postmodern text, words mediate the real, as Hartman proposes in *Beyond Formalism*, by using the physical stance of the written word as a portal to the imagination. The materiality of language is emphasized only to readdress problems with the postmodern problem of representation, which becomes intensified in the postmodern condition by an excessive use of ‘petrified’ expressions. This use of language attends to the echoes of the word to amplify its mediatory character within the postmodern condition, which threatens with a deadening insipidity.

### **3.3. Topography and Typography: Hartman’s ‘Spot Syndrome’ and Problems of Orientation.**

The preoccupation of this section is the concept of space and the part it plays in conceptions of accommodation, whether that accommodating space is the house of Zampanò’s story or the literary text. Accordingly, the focus here will be on ideas of space, place, topography and orientation and their role in the interpretation of the postmodern text. It would be useful then to attempt to define the meaning of ‘space’ and the specification of ‘place’. ‘Space’ has spatial and temporal connotations: it refers to a particular location, an available spot or field but it also suggests a time span, an instant or duration, a stretch of time. ‘Space’ then is accommodative, as it suggests the capacity of a sphere. But ‘space’ is also suggestive of an expansion or the distance in-between. In that, the concept of ‘space’ may also be indicative of a gap, a rupture that acts as mediation. ‘Place’, on the other hand, delineates a dwelling; it indicates a particular portion of space, which constitutes a station, a residence and a particular spot. ‘Place’ is more spatial, than temporal; as *topos*, ‘place’ is also suggestive of a position, specified by commonplace or a theme. ‘Place’ is then a region of a point or a spot, while

‘space’ is the expansion that mediates the tenancy of that position or *topos*.<sup>26</sup> The concepts of ‘space’ and ‘place’ become significant in *House of Leaves* because of a constant insistence on orientation. Either through the explorer’s mapping of the house or through the reader’s attempt to distinguish a line of reading through the typographical and narrative labyrinth of the text, the themes of topography and orientation appear in *House of Leaves* and demand more examination.

Hartman’s criticism has been characteristic of a similar difficulty, related to the reader’s orientation: his intellectual journeys rarely allow the comfort of reaching a specific ‘place’, point or *topos*. Still, Hartman’s criticism returns sporadically to references of the story of Philomela, a story from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which tells the tale of Philomela’s rape by Tereus. Tereus cuts Philomela’s tongue in order to prevent her from revealing him but Philomela ‘weaves a tell-tale account of her violation into a tapestry (or robe) which Sophocles calls “the voice of the shuttle”’ to disclose Tereus’ assault.<sup>27</sup> From one weaved picture to the next, the viewer’s look sets upon Philomela’s tapestry and the disclosure of her transgressor. To follow Philomela’s thread is to ‘read’ the patterns of pictures and signs that entwine her story. Although silent, the materiality (of the rod) and physical space (of the robe) that Philomela’s ‘wording’ occupies is telling. Attending to the ‘silent’ word is one of the things that distinguishes Hartman’s criticism. Hartman’s reading draws on the middle terms that are often elided. After the Hartman approach, these passed-over, ‘silent’ terms

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<sup>26</sup> For a further analysis of the concept of space, see Heidegger’s discussion of Da-Sein as being-in-the-world, in “Being-in-the-World in General as the Fundamental Constitution of Da-Sein” in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. Joan Stambaugh, New York: State University of New York, 1996). Also, Gadamer writes in relation to meaning and the concept of space: ‘Stoic logic speaks of incorporeal meanings by means of which talk about things occurs (to lekton). It is highly significant that these meanings are put on the same level as topos – i.e., space. Just as empty space is first given to thought only by mentally removing the objects related to each another within it, so “meanings” as such are now conceived by themselves for the first time, and a concept is created for them by mentally removing the things that are named by the meaning of words. Meanings, too, are like a space in which things are related to one another.’ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London: Continuum, 2003), 433.

<sup>27</sup> Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 337. ‘The voice of the shuttle’ appears in the *Poetics* as ‘he tes kerkidos phone’ (1454b). ‘Phone’ translates as the sound of voice, while ‘kerkidos’ is the accusative of ‘kerkis’, a rod, comb or shuttle. Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 23, transl. W.H. Fyfe (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1932).

regain their significance in enriching our understanding of the text. Hartman's close 'listening' to the text orchestrates his closer reading. When in *Beyond Formalism*, Hartman relates Philomela's silent tale to poetry, he argues that '[r]eading a poem is like walking on silence – on volcanic silence' and explains that in reading poetry the more we attend to the middle, silent parts, the more we become aware of eruptions of meanings.<sup>28</sup> For Hartman, the clearer we see the gaps or elided parts of the text, the easier it becomes for our reading to step away from the text's structural and textual stipulations and release our interpretative responses from critical canons.

When faced with postmodern readings, Hartman's attention to what is elided as a source for an upsurge of meanings raises a challenge that Hartman is aware of. In postmodern fiction, particularly *House of Leaves*, each and every word strikes the reader with a vigorous intensity. What complicates the interpretation of the postmodern text is the recognition of the gap from which Hartman's critical approach often springs. In postmodern fiction the 'silent' terms appear to evaporate. In *House of Leaves*, a plethora of words appear to be 'screaming' for attention and overwhelm the reader's audible senses. The typographical experimentation used to put emphasis on words adds to the reader's sense of disorientation and makes it difficult to distinguish between what is prominent or auxiliary in the text. Hartman addresses the postmodern problem of 'distinction – or indistinction – of appearances' and relates it to a search for authenticity to argue that today, 'as we direct the movie camera toward even the most trivial event, there is an insidious expectation, an excitement not unmixed with fear, that the filmed nonevent may become eventful.'<sup>29</sup> Hartman's observation is not only vital for the world of cinematography or television but it is relevant too to the postmodern novel, which seeks to intrigue the eye. In *House of Leaves* the presentation and appearance of words raises

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<sup>28</sup> Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 342.

<sup>29</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, ix.



interpretative echoes. This reveals a strong link between the reader's visual and auricular field. It is exactly this entanglement of the senses, however, that makes the interpretation of the text so challenging. Consequently, *House of Leaves* raises the question: is the employment of visual stimuli distracting from the reading of the postmodern text, or is the placement and topography of extreme typography to be embraced as suggestive or provocative of another way of reading?

The preoccupation with the concepts of space and place is distinct in Hartman's reading of Wordsworth. Hartman draws on Wordsworth's fascination with landscapes and places and suggests that the poet suffers from what he names as 'the spot syndrome', 'the mind's search for a landscape adequate to its idea.'<sup>30</sup> Hartman's 'spot syndrome' is more than a poet's quest for representation. Hartman suggests that the artist's 'obsession with specific place' becomes concentrated and 'reduced to one center as dangerous as any holy site. This site is an omphalos: the navel-point at which powers meet, the "one" place leading to a vision of the One.'<sup>31</sup> The meditative and mediating nature of the omphalic spot acts like a portal to imagination. In *House of Leaves* such a spot features in the text in representations of the uncanny house, which culminates in Will's, Zampanò's and John's vision of a place that is both a passage and source. A symptom of the 'spot syndrome' is the repetitive and particular use of the word 'house' in the text. Throughout the novel the word 'house' appears in the text typed in a different font colour and whether the word appears in the course of a sentence, in a language other than English or as part of another word, it centres and concentrates the reader's attention on a structure (a building or a word) which comes to signify a portal or navel spot, the birth place of imagination. The word 'house' emphasizes the idea of that place as the binding, connective centre of the narrative but the typography in which the word

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<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 122.

<sup>31</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 122.

appears (always in a light grey font) expresses the concept of the house as a ‘grey area’ and in that sense, ‘house’ becomes suggestive of a gap that constantly fragments the text, dividing it and thus breaching any sense of unity.<sup>32</sup> The omphalos of ‘house’ in *House of Leaves* is a *topos* that ‘is at once breach and nexus, a breach in nature and a nexus for it and a different world.’<sup>33</sup>

The ‘spot syndrome’ signifies a fixation with location, a particular place in space. But a ‘spot’ has a temporal character too, since it can also signify duration or a particular moment in space. Hartman explores the ‘spot syndrome’ in terms of its temporal character and the artist’s obsession with a particular moment in time, as well as place, which he names ‘spots of time’. While reading Wordsworth, Hartman suggests that,

[I]t is hard to decide whether the first or second member of the partitive construction “spots of time” should be emphasized. If we derive the origin of the notion from Wordsworth’s attraction to specific place (the omphalos or spot syndrome), and notice that “spot” is subtly used in two senses – as denoting particular *places* in nature, and fixed *points* in time (“islands in the unnavigable depth / Of our departed time”) – the emphasis would fall on the initial word. But the natural pull of the phrase, and the fact that these spots are not only *in* time, like islands, but also creative *of* time or of a vivifying temporal consciousness, throws the emphasis to the second noun and evokes a beaconing “time-spot.” The concept is, in any case, very rich, fusing not only time and place but also stasis and continuity. The fixity or fixation that

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<sup>32</sup> Indicatively ‘house’ appears as ‘Zuhause-sein’, ‘domus’, ‘~~house~~’, maison, ‘slaughterhouse’, ‘[ou]e’ and ‘housing’. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 24, 107, 114, 188, 314, 330 and 348.

<sup>33</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry: 1787-1814*, 122.

points to an apocalyptic consciousness of self is temporalized, reintegrated in the stream of life.<sup>34</sup>

The artist's fixation with a particular region has both a spatial and a temporal character and, in that, is an indication of a historically conscious self. The fixed field becomes temporalized not so much in order to re-enter it in the space of our everydayness but more to make it present.<sup>35</sup> Hartman finds an example of the idea of a 'time-spot' in the inscription, which is suggestive of both the notions of place and time. For Hartman, the inscription brings on a consciousness of the significance of a particular place in another moment in time. In *House of Leaves*, 'house' may be thought of as another form of an inscription. Whenever the type 'house' appears in the text, it not only occupies a place in the context of a sentence but it becomes suggestive of another place (Will Navidson's house) *and* time (Zampanò's and then John's). 'House' alerts the reader to meaning associations that exceed the particular use of the word in a fixed or set context. It breaches and fragments the narration to allow for interpretative space but it also unifies the three different narrative time frames and stories of Will, Zampanò and John.

It is often the case in *House of Leaves* that the type 'house' appears in the course of a sentence as a reflection of the complexities the sentence describes. One of Will's letters to Karen, for example, reads:

Do you believe in God? I don't think I ever asked you that one. Well I do now. But my God isn't your Catholic varietal or your Judaic or Mormon or Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist or whatever / whoever. No burning bush, no angels, no cross. God's a house. Which is not to say that our house is

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<sup>34</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 212.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger's description of Da-sein in *Being and Time* appears relevant to Hartman's thoughts about the spatial and temporal nature of the 'spot syndrome'. For Heidegger, 'Da-sein does not fill out a piece of space as a real thing or useful thing would do, so that the boundaries dividing it from the surrounding space would themselves just define that space spatially. In the literal sense, Da-sein takes space in. It is by no means merely objectively present in the piece of space that its body fills out.' Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 336.

God's house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house is God.<sup>36</sup>

Will's house is a space where the entire dimensions exceed the measurements of the interior. Its mapping proves impossible because of a constant re-shaping of the house's rooms. For Will, that house represents and reflects his idea of God. Will's God is unrepresentable and yet, accommodating. 'House' is a reflection of an ambiguous yet penetrating grace; a vision of 'a center as dangerous as any holy site'.<sup>37</sup> But the typology of 'house' does not always appear to signify or merge with a particular representation of one specific idea. Instead, 'house' seems to appear in the course of narration, as in the following entry from Zampanò: 'Judging from the house footage, what seems to really push Tom over the edge that second day is when he reenters the house and finds Daisy – her forearms acrawl with strange scratches – swaying in front of the hallway screaming "Daddy!" despite the absence of a reply, the absence of an echo.'<sup>38</sup> Here, the ashen colour of the font in which the word 'house' appears and its repetition in the passage implies the complexities of thinking about Will's house. The type 'house' evokes a sense of length and distance in following the word 'footage'. This appears relevant to the inability to accurately measure the size of Will's house and echoes another, more literal dimension to Tom being pushed 'over the edge'. Furthermore, given the fact that Daisy suffers from echolalia, the automatic and involuntary repeating of what another person says may account for the re-entry of the type 'house' in the text. Daisy is found echoing herself with her repeated cries of 'Daddy'. The repetition of 'house' in the text may be then perceived as a symptom of echolalia, the resounding of the word or the rereading of the inscription, which reverberates through the text. All that can exist in the house is echo. In *House of Leaves* 'house' becomes a reminder, a ghost or a replying

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<sup>36</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 390.

<sup>37</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814*, 122.

<sup>38</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 320.

cry.<sup>39</sup> The place of 'house' becomes a space open to interpretation; it allows the wording of different voices.

### 3.4. Disembodied Echoes.

*House of Leaves* presents a particular difficulty in reading due to its elaborate interweaving of narrative voices. A section that becomes characteristic of that complexity is Zampanò's elaboration on the concept of echo. In 'The Navidson Record', Zampanò focuses on the epistemological nature of echo, defining it in relation to space and orientation. He also explores its mythical significance, noting a sense of emptiness associated with either a repeated and futile rejection of voice or the negation of the materiality of language. This section concerning the nature of echo becomes entangled with extensive footnotes that introduce John's narrative voice, which relates his experience of reading Zampanò's fragments to the meeting of a girl John falls instantly in love with. Both John's love story and Zampanò's discussion of echo are tinted with a sense of disembodiment. When John reads Zampanò's discussion on echo he declares that the more he 'focused on the words the farther [he] seemed from [his] room.'<sup>40</sup> Focusing on Zampanò's letter (which takes the sense of Scripture for John) initiates a distancing that allows the reviewing of his circumstances. The intensive attention to Zampanò's writing leads John to perceive Zampanò's word as a portal to imagination. Hartman suggests that today 'the eyes defeat themselves by looking everywhere.'<sup>41</sup> Here, it is when the eyes focus that perception enhances. John's (inner) eye fixes on the disjointed pieces of Zampanò's text as the extension of himself. Zampanò's text

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<sup>39</sup> With regard to the idea of place as a ghost, in *Beyond Formalism*, Hartman writes about James's use of displacement: 'The displacement of a person, as from America to Europe, is the start of a spiritual adventure involving a gothic traversing of unknown areas of influence – not necessarily forbidden rooms, recesses, and gardens, yet analogous to these. Place has presence or is an extension of a presence; and if people fall under the spell of others, it is because they cannot escape an intentionality that extends to place and haunts imagination like a ghost.' Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 110.

expands John's being.<sup>42</sup> The reader becomes reflective and reflected on 'The Navidson Record', a body of text that is fragmented and echoing. But this expansion of self is traumatic. As with his reading experience, John becomes disembodied in love. His narration about falling in love is followed by an experience that leaves him crippled with fear.

'Urine soaking into my pants, fecal matter running down the back of my legs,  
I'm caught in it, must run and hide from it, but I still can't move. In fact, the  
more I try to escape, the less I can breathe. The more I try to hold on, the less I  
can focus. Something's leaving me. Parts of me. / Everything falls apart. /  
Stories heard but not recalled. / Letters too.'<sup>43</sup>

Triggered by love and Zampanò's discussion of echo, John becomes fearful of the impossibility of holding on to both a fixed idea of self and the materiality of language. As everything parts from John's body, he experiences a disembodiment, which leaves him with just echoes or reverberations of the stories that compose his history, a de-distancing enabled by the hollowness of his being. It is this kenotic disembodiment that allows John to tell his story (*his-story*). Essentially, in *House of Leaves* the idea of narrating personal history becomes centred on the *topos* of a cavity, the concept of the house. This chaotic space holds all stories. What both Zampanò's and John's stories testify to is that the 'house is history and history is uninhabited.'<sup>44</sup> History is a house that cannot fulfil its primary purpose of accommodation, by just withholding the bodies and materials of other times. In not being some sort of a museum space, history sanctions the premises of an accommodating space for all stories, as disembodied echoes.

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<sup>42</sup> See Martin Heidegger's, *Being and Time* for a discussion of being and Da-Sein, particularly 94-105, for the spatiality of da-sein, and 335-338 for the temporality of its spatiality.

<sup>43</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 71. John's comments can also be thought of as an expression of the postmodern condition.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 546. The emptiness of the 'house' could then be thought of as a *memento mori*.

In Philomela's story, the shuttle becomes the apparatus that carries her voice to the minds of others. Philomela's *phone* generates from and belongs to the shuttle and so the instrument appears as the vital agent that allows for the overcoming of trauma. Philomela's story is cathartic in restoring voice to the voiceless. While Philomela's muteness leads her to the weaving of pictures, Zampanò's blindness leads him to the weaving of the sound of words. Lost sight often suggests an augmented ability to hear and in his transcriptions of the film recordings Zampanò seeks to 'see through' the dense darkness of the Great Hall. Still, in the text Zampanò's listening and resounding of information testifies to the struggle of a man, who, like John, cannot reach the truth about the house. Furthermore, Zampanò's lost eye(s) (or 'I') is a representation of his authoritative style, which renounces authorship through the excessive use of footnotes, quotations and other elaborate interjections. The interlacing of narratives in the text makes *House of Leaves* a calico of literary voices weaved in and directed to hold an attraction and a distraction: attract the reader to the fabric of storytelling and distract him from that very search of a plot, a purpose or an ultimate truth.

The typography of the text reflects this indeterminacy and by imitating what the words describe the text's typographical experimentation emphasizes the impossibility of reaching a point. A critical moment in the narrative describes how the rope that binds together the explorers of the Great Hall and connects them with the real, outside world breaks. The following quotation appears upside down in the text forcing the reader to reverse the book and enter an unorthodox mode of reading. The quotation expands and stretches to cover an entire page:

Then at a certain point, the depth of the stairway begins to exceed the length of the rope. By the time Reston reaches the top the rope has gone taut, but the stairway still continues to stretch. Realizing what is about to happen, Navidson makes a desperate grab for the only remaining thread connecting him to home, but he is too late. About ten feet above the last  
banister

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r

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p

e<sup>45</sup>

The sentence breaks at this point and the page ends with this elongated presentation of the word ‘rope’, which becomes suggestive of an expanding and extensive cord.<sup>46</sup> To continue reading, the book has to be turned over again. This movement appears similar to the act of collecting a rope: the reading of the text resembles the curling up of a rope in a loop around one’s hands. In following the narrative string, the reader has to physically mimic gathering a cord or string. It takes the span of the three next pages to conclude the sentence of the above quotation: the page that follows is empty, except from the letters ‘sn-’ that appear close to the bottom right side of the page; the next page is also blank apart from the letter ‘-a-’ appearing reversed diagonally around the middle; page 246 concludes with the letters ‘-ps...’ appearing on the right top end of the page. The rope ‘sn-a-ps’, the word ‘snaps’ is ‘snapped’ too and the explorers are now separated from the outside world. The word ‘snap’ signifies a sudden, sharp break and thus it is paradoxical that the word expands to cover three pages. Its fragmentation, however, emphasizes the sound of ‘snap’, allowing for the sounds of the letters to occupy space within the text. The division of ‘snaps’ comes to reflect the vastness of the darkness that surrounds the explorers: the blank spaces that surround the letters ‘sn’, ‘a’ and ‘ps’ are the space where the sounds of this letters echo. The fragmented appearance of

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<sup>45</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 293.

<sup>46</sup> The cord may also be thought of as a chord, the arrangement of notes on a string instrument, that sounds and echoes through the pages that follow.



the word ‘snap’ makes the breakage with the real world of the explorers more dramatic and their fall into darkness more striking.

In the vast and sinister place of the Great Hall the explorers depend on reverberations of sound in order to orientate themselves within the hall’s rooms. The longer the echo the bigger the space revealed; the shorter the echo the smaller the room they enter. The labyrinths of the ear and that of their surroundings seem to correspond. Still, Will confesses that after a while ‘direction no longer matters’, something that becomes reflected in the intricate typography in which this statement appears.<sup>47</sup> Could it be that direction becomes irrelevant in regard to the process and order of reading this text? The fragmentation of words and the break of sentences in the text lead on a particular order in reading. The use of numbered footnotes also indicates a particular organization in regards to the representation of the reading material. The complexity of the text suggests that acquiring some sense of direction is vital. Still, the degree of intricacy and entanglement makes such orientation nearly impossible. The addition of extended pieces of text that are simply lists of names or locations makes it even harder for the reader to decide on a ‘correct’ order of reading. *House of Leaves* is a labyrinth of literary voices in which the reader must find his own method of orientation and way to advance with the process of reading. As with the house, the text appears constantly fluid, changing and transforming. What is then the narrative thread that the reader should follow? Hartman may provide a response to that: ‘The letter as vehicle’ he writes, ‘can never be erased: It is, by the sheer fact of alphabetical existence, as well as its inertial meanings, the ghostlier of creations, at once opaque and transparent, persistent and barely noticed.’<sup>48</sup> In *House of Leaves*, the letter is the vehicle for every possible line of reading.<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, the text questions the reception of language and the letter as a fixed (‘petrified’) form, which, as we have seen, can

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<sup>47</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 433.

<sup>48</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> See Figure 1, 125.

often be a typical perception of the language of the postmodern condition. *House of Leaves* emphasizes the plasticity of the word and the significance of the reader's reaction to language, as part of the postmodern reading experience. What direction we take within the typographical and narrative maze of the text and every different 'stitching' together of the narrative voices of *House of Leaves* affects our interpretation.<sup>50</sup> The resonances of meaning and interpretative echoes are only enriched by the suppleness of the text.

In the novel, it is not only the explorers of the house that create or cause noise and sounds for the purposes of orientation. A growl echoes and disturbs the otherwise completely silent rooms of the Great Hall. The source of the growl remains unexplained but in 'The Navidson Record' an academic source is quoted suggesting that the roar appears with every reshaping of the house. If we accept the source, the howl appears as a voice that signifies transformation. In *Scars of the Spirit*, Hartman finds a similar voice that evokes a 'power of transformation' in the Bible.<sup>51</sup> Hartman argues that the voice of God appears in many instances in the Scriptures as both 'a commanding voice instantly originating light' and 'a hovering force in the formless darkness'.<sup>52</sup> This disembodied voice comes as the manifestation of *ruach*, divine breath, wind or spirit. *Ruach* is a force found, among other places, in the Book of Job. As with God's response to Job which, in being inquisitive, echoes Job's questioning, the house's *ruach* to Will is the echo that reflects his questioning of the house. As with Job's experience of God's *ruach*, Will gets to hear the house 'breathe', a deep, low, awe-inspiring noise that echoes like a call.<sup>53</sup> And as with Job, in the end Will is restored.

Will's journey ends with a kenotic experience:

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<sup>50</sup> See Figure 2, 126.

<sup>51</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger discusses the nature of the Call in *Being and Time* (see especially 247-272) where he argues that '[t]o hear the call authentically means to bring oneself to factual action.' Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 271.

Finally Navidson's words, tunes, and shivering murmurs trail off into a painful rasp. He knows his voice will never heat this world. Perhaps no voice will. Memories cease to surface. Sorrow threatens to no longer matter.

Navidson is forgetting.

Navidson is dying.<sup>54</sup>

Navidson's voice disappears as the possibility of utterance evaporates in the cold air. The death of utterance signifies an entry to forgetfulness and Navidson vanishes 'completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza'.<sup>55</sup> Heidegger's phenomenological ontology suggests that the forgetting of Da-Sein is not 'nothing, nor is it just a failure to remember; it is rather a "positive," ecstatic mode of having-been; a mode with a character of its own.'<sup>56</sup> This having-been retains Da-Sein and it is positive because '*remembering* is possible only on the basis of forgetting, *and not the other way around*'.<sup>57</sup> In the text, the mark of the word survives in a stanza.<sup>58</sup> The having-been of Navidson's utterance has always been and still remains in the space of the house, as lyrical as a song or prayer. Hartman suggests that for Nietzsche 'genuine critique could only arise [...] out of the spirit of music – where music stands for the lure of absorption, self-forgetfulness, even Dionysian enticement' and concludes in 'Democracy's Museum':<sup>59</sup>

Aesthetic distance, then, or the space we enter by means of image, sound or word, is more than a flight from reality, the evasion of a powerful seduction. It is also the marshalling of counterforce. Wallace Stevens defined imagination as a violence from within pressing against a violence from

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<sup>54</sup> Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 483. This quotation appears horizontally and on the external right end side of the page.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 484.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 312.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 312.

<sup>58</sup> '[T]his stanza does not remain entirely empty.' Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 486.

<sup>59</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 191.

without. Art displays that nonviolent violence: by action-at-a distance it reaches toward the palm at the back of the mind.<sup>60</sup>

### 3.5. Conclusion: The Fabric of Sound.

This chapter has explored the significance of Hartman's critical approach of attending to the silent word and shown how Hartman's interpretive approach may influence the interpretation of the postmodern literary text. In the postmodern condition, an overexposure of words renders us deaf to multiple possibilities of meaning, or, to borrow from Hartman, unable to feel the heat of volcanic meaning under our feet. In *House of Leaves*, revisiting and reconsidering the concept of house as an accommodating spot exposes both a temporal and a spatial character, which unities but also breaches the text. The use of the idea of the house acts as a portal for the exposure of different meanings. The idea of house is used in the text to provide a reflection of the processes of storytelling and reading and reflect on the idea of history as an accommodating space enabled only by disembodied echoes.

With its experimentation and typographical excessiveness *House of Leaves* escapes visual and literary frames. The playfulness with typography serves to expose different voices, which become incorporated in the discourse of the text. Hearing becomes a way to reaching the (w)hole. But the anxiety of language in the postmodern condition reaches the labyrinths of our ears as the sound of a knell. In "Psychoanalysis: The French Connection" Hartman reads Derrida's *Glas* to argue that the text evades closure:

The rhyming properties of language, the sonic rings and resonances always potentially there, are like Poe's "The Bells" (cited by him) and their telltale symptoms of a vertiginous *glissement* of language toward an uncontrollable echoing: a mad round of verbal associations or signifier-signifying

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<sup>60</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 209.

signifiers. The anxiety roused by language *as* language is that this echoing movement cannot be economized, that it is a fluid curse, a telling that is merely that of time, whose wasting becomes a tolling: Glas.<sup>61</sup>

The sound of glas is the sound of a bell that announces a death or failure. The proclamation of the sounding bell is mournful, ominous and comes as a warning. It warns of an end and sounds to celebrate it. In *House of Leaves*, the house becomes such a warning, growling against the stability of its own walls and, at the same time, celebrating how the walls reverberate its ominous sound. Like another shuttle, the house carries a multiplicity of meanings that become interweaved in an aural calico, a coarse cloth that is too crude and heavy to dress a body with. This calico of echoes resounds in postmodern fiction with the same intensity as with any other genre of literature. What it may be warning of is the danger of approaching the echoes of the postmodern text with *otologic* intentions or aspirations of ‘curing’ what is caught within the labyrinths of our ears.

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<sup>61</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 108.

Figure 1

Page 432 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

And then the walls reappear, along with the ceiling and numerous doorways; the shifts always accompanied by that inimitable, and by now very familiar, growl.

As the days pass, Navidson becomes more and more aware that he is running precariously low on water and food. Even worse, the sense of inevitable doom this causes him is compounded by the sense of immediate doom he feels whenever he begins riding his bike: "I can't help thinking I'm going to reach an edge to this thing. I'll be going too fast to stop and just fly off into darkness."<sup>9</sup>

Which is almost what happens.

On the twelfth or thirteenth day (it is very difficult to tell which), after sleeping for what Navidson estimates must have been well over 18 hours, he again sets off down the hallway.

Soon the walls and

doorways recede and

v a n i s h,

then

the

ceiling

sight  
of

out

completely

is

out

lifts

too

completely

it

is

of

too

until

sight

Figure 2

Page 134 from Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Hagia Sophia, Ravenna's interior of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Rome's S. Stefano Rotondo or S. Maria Maggiore or S. Clemente, or Milan's S. Lorenzo, or even the plan of Old St Peter's, nor the slightest trace of classical foundations whether Greek, Hellenistic, or Roman, as might be exemplified by the Temple of Jupiter, Diocletian's palace at Spalato, the gateway to the market at Miletus, Algeria's Timgad with its Arch of Trajan, apartment housing in Ostia, Trajan's Market in Rome, also in Rome, the Baths of Dio-

cletian, the Basilica of Max-  
 centius, Baths of Caracalla,  
 the Temple of Venus, near  
 the Golden House of Nero,  
 Hadrian's Mausoleum, the  
 Mausoleum of Caecilia  
 Metella on the Via Appia,  
 the Canopus of Hadrian's  
 villa, the interior of the Pan-  
 theon, Hadrian's villa at  
 Tivoli, or the Piazza d'Oro  
 with peristyle court and  
 pavilions, or the Flavian  
 Palace, the Villa of the Mys-  
 teries in Pompeii, plan of the  
 Villa Jovis at Capri, Arch of  
 Tiberius at Orange, France,  
 Trajan's column in Rome, the  
 Imperial Forum, Temple of  
 Mars Ultor, Forum Augustum,  
 Forum of Nerva, the Forum  
 Romanum with the arch of Septimius  
 Severus, the Arch of Titus and the Temple of Cas-  
 tor and Pollux, or in Spain the aqueduct at  
 Segovia, or back in Rome the theatre of Marcellus,  
 the Colosseum, the sanctuary of Fortuna Primige-  
 nia, Praeneste with its axonometric reconstruction,  
 the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, the Forum Boarium  
 in Rome, the Maison Carrée at Nîmes, or the  
 House of the Vettii in Pompeii, the walls of Hercu-  
 laneum, the terrace of Naxian Lions on Delos, the  
 Tower of the Winds in Athens, the Stoa of Attalus  
 in the agora of Athens, the plan for the city of  
 Pergamum or city center of Miletus or the Bouleu-  
 terium in Miletus, or the Temple of Apollo at  
 Didyma, Temple of Athena Polias at Priene, Mau-  
 soleum at Halicarnassus, the theatre at Epidaurus,  
 the Choric Monument of Lycisrates in Athens as  
 well as the Temple of Olympian Zeus, or the tholos  
 at Delphi, or the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, or  
 the Erechtheion on the Acropolis, the Porphyraea  
 on the Acropolis, the Parthenon with its Panathenaic  
 frieze, Athen's acropolis, the temple of Aphaia at  
 Aegina, the Temple of Olympian Zeus at Agrag-  
 as, the Temple of Hera or Poseidon or Neptune at  
 Paestum, the Temple of Apollo at Corinth, the  
 shrine of Anubis at the Temple of Hatshepsut,  
 Deir al Bahari, or the Lion Gate at Mycenae, or the  
 palace at Mycenae, the palace of Tiryns, the Palace  
 of Minos, Knossos, Crete—which seems like a  
 good place to end though it cannot end there, espe-  
 cially when there is still the Great Zimbabwe En-  
 closure, the Giza pyramids of Mykerinos, Cheops and  
 Chefren, to say nothing of Ireland's New Grange  
 passage grave, France's Essé gallery grave, Malta's  
 Ggantija temple complex, Scotland's Skara Brae's  
 settlement, the Lascaux cave, the Lausell pre-his-  
 toric rock-cut Venus, or the notion of the Terra  
 Armata hut which is also a good place to end  
 though of course it cannot end there either....147

Perhaps<sup>165</sup>

here

is as good a place as any to consider some of the ghosts haunting *The Navidson Record*. And since more than a handful of people have pointed out similarities between Navidson's film and various commercial productions, it seems worthwhile to at least briefly examine what distinguishes documentaries from Hollywood releases.<sup>166</sup>

In his essay "Critical Condition" published in *Simple Themes* (University of Washington Press, 1995) Brendan Beinhorn declared that Davidson's house, when the explorers were within it, was in a state of severe shock. "However *without* them, it is completely dead. Humanity serves as its life blood. Humanity's end would mark the house's end." A statement which provoked sociologist Sondra Staff to claim "Critical Condition" was "just another sheaf of Beinhorn bullshit." (A lecture delivered at Our Lady of the Lake University of San Antonio on June 26, 1996.)

<sup>165</sup>Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò's or his own. — Ed.

No "Difference" Film  
 100 In his essay "It Makes  
 Quarterly v.8, July, 1993, p.  
 68, Daniel Rosenblum  
 wrote: "In response to the  
 suggestion that the names  
 of the ghosts haunting  
 Davidson's house are none  
 other than *The Shining*,  
 Vertigo, 2001, Brazil,  
 Lawrence of Arabia, Pol-  
 tergeist, Amityville Horror,  
 Night of the Living Dead,

## Chapter 4

### Transgression and Postmodern Fiction

‘The transgression is in the stealer’<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the significance of the effects of transgression in the birth and composition of postmodern fiction. Transgression involves the exceeding of boundaries or conventional limitations and the violation of principles or law. The first section of this chapter explores the effects of transgression in the emergence of postmodern fiction and relates it to Hartman’s theory on literary history and the problematic of situating the artistic identity within a historical context. The following section, “Transgression and Filth”, explores the manner in which transgression is conveyed in the postmodern text. Irvine Welsh’s *Filth* (1998) becomes preoccupied with expressions of transgression and attends to its many manifestations and effects on identity and the self. “Transgression and Filth” questions whether *Filth* presents the ‘evils’ of the postmodern condition didactically. The next section, “Interpretation and Nosology”, focuses on a concern that has preoccupied Hartman’s criticism: Hartman maintains that interpretative acts that seek to identify the text’s ‘maladies’ reduce interpretation, turning it into nosology and the categorizing of medical conditions. Yet postmodern criticism continues to seek to identify the elements that characterize a text as postmodern by categorization and comparison. The question arises of how the interpretation of the postmodern text should ensue. The forth

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, ed. John F. Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).



section, “Transgression and Stealth”, responds to this question with an analysis of *Filth*’s elements of concealment. *Filth*’s themes and textual experimentation construct the reader as another detective. However, in following the protagonist’s and the text’s transgressions the reader becomes faced not with a judicial revelation but with the hope of unification. In thinking about the artistic identity within a historical context this chapter focuses on transgression in order to examine the effects of postmodernism on the creative self and explore the role of the literary critic and the nature of criticism in the postmodern condition.

#### **4.1. Postmodern Theory and Literary History.**

In an attempt to identify the transforming and ever-changing nature of postmodern fiction, postmodern literary theories have generally approached the postmodern text as a progression of or a complete rupture from modernist concerns.<sup>2</sup> The idea of postmodernism as a progression from modernism is approached with distrust by theorists who think that some modernist concerns are in need of preservation. Characteristically, Jürgen Habermas locates in modernism values worthy of perpetuation. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner suggest in *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, ‘[i]n contrast to postmodern theory, Habermas wants to valorize early modernity and to realize its unfulfilled potential.’<sup>3</sup> For Habermas, the errors of modernity are in need of rectification and postmodernism negates or rejects early modernist values, while modernism remains an incomplete project. Other theorists, however, such as Leslie Fielder, Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan, share a view of postmodern culture as a positive development that comes to oppose modernism’s oppressive aspects. Fielder proposes that postmodern art bridges the gap

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<sup>2</sup> As the word suggests, the ‘post’ of ‘postmodernism’ suggests what comes *after* modernism both in the sense of continuation and prevailing over modernist concerns.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Best, Douglas Kellner, eds. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), 236.

between high (elitist) and low (popular) culture. For Sontag, postmodernism opposes modernism's demands and requirements of expertise for the acquisition of meaning. Sontag links postmodernism with experience, rather than knowledge, arguing that 'postmodern art simply *is*'.<sup>4</sup> Sontag's immediacy of experience has often been linked with Hassan's concept of immanence, which he situates as characteristic of the postmodern condition.<sup>5</sup> Whether the postmodern advance is thought to hinder the fulfilment of modernist values or is seen as a positive development which overcomes modernism's oppressive aspects, postmodernism exists in a structural relation to modernity.

Other aspects of postmodern theory take a different approach and emphasize the rupture of postmodernism from modernity and other earlier theoretical traditions. Jean-François Lyotard is characteristic of this position in rejecting the understanding of postmodernism as a succession of modernism. For Lyotard, postmodernism's plurality signifies a total rupture from the past and a break not only from modernism but all theories that champion unification. Lyotard's concept of the collapse of grand narratives in postmodernity is taken further by Jean Baudrillard who views the spread of globalization as a sign of the total collapse of the idea of history. Baudrillard's theory asserts that faith in historical progress and the belief of an eminent end or completion of history is evoked in the postmodern condition, only to support views that are not generally followed by popular consensus. This infraction he views as a clear indication of history's end.<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical concern about postmodernism's progression or rupture from history becomes materialized in the postmodern artefact. The collapse of locality and

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Natoli, Linda Hutcheon, eds. *A Postmodern Reader*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 32.

<sup>5</sup> For the relation of Sontag to Hassan see Natoli's and Hutcheon's, *A Postmodern Reader* and also Best's and Kellner's, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. For Hassan's concept of immanence see Hassan's, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyama also proposes the end of history, arguing that ideological progression has come to an end, in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

internationality, objectivity and subjectivity, reality and perception inspire postmodern expression which communicates such disintegrations with ingenuity. As postmodern art experiments with ideas of structure and form, notions of artistic identity and historical consciousness become transgressed. The questioning of traditional expressive modes reveals that postmodern art is dependent on the struggle of positioning the artistic identity within a postmodern historical context. It is in this process that the notions of identity and history become transgressed and broadened. In *After Theory: Postmodernism/postmarxism*, Thomas Docherty discusses postmodernism's transgression of artistic limitations to suggest that 'in the postmodern work, the transgression of bounds in art makes it difficult to sustain [such] a categorical distinction between the aesthetic and the historical.'<sup>7</sup> Postmodern art's experimentation transgresses the boundaries of reality, producing a fusion that merges the factual with individual perception. As Docherty notes, the problematic issuing from this is the inability of distinguishing the artistic from the historical. Postmodern literature appears predominantly placed in contemporaneity, yet its experimentation with collage, pastiche and graphic reproductions challenge the reader's perception of the factual and, consequently, complicate the distinguishing of the imaginative and fictive. Postmodern fiction queries perceptions of creativity and history by transgressing the notion of form. As the concepts of the fictive and the historical become contaminated, what becomes clear is that postmodern fiction issues from the problematic of situating the artistic identity within the historical context of the postmodern condition.

The significance of postmodern fiction's transgression of history and the artistic becomes more explicit when we consider some earlier critical developments. The possible coexistence of the factual or historical and the literary is a question that has

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism / Postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 24.

occupied literary criticism in the past. In the concluding essay for *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970*, Hartman becomes preoccupied with the perhaps paradoxical notion of 'literary history'. In 'Toward Literary History', Hartman voices a critical preoccupation with the question of whether it is possible to produce literary history and a text that is both literary and historical. In his essay, this question instigates Hartman's defence of both the concepts of history and artistry. Hartman, however, notes a significant difference between the two: opposed to history, which becomes shaped by a number of factors, fiction is autonomous and self-sufficient. Hartman suggests that this autonomy allows for the violation of traditional notions of form. Consequently, he argues, the concept of form is continuously expanded in literary criticism. In 1970, this observation signals for Hartman, the birth of a new theory of form: only literary history can 'help to restore [the artist's] faith in two things: in Form, and in his historical vocation.'<sup>8</sup>

In his essay, Hartman seeks a theory that links 'the form of the medium to the form of the artist's historical consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> For this, he examines as possible starting points: a Marxist position, Northrop Frye's theoretical contribution and I. R. Richards's approach on form. While noting the merits of these three positions for the development of a new consensus on form and literary history, Hartman argues: firstly, that the Marxist approach on form and structure poses form as 'a falling star in the twilight of taboos';<sup>10</sup> secondly, that while Frye's conceptualization of form as an idea of universality liberates art from elitism, it does not 'bring together the form of art and the form of historical consciousness';<sup>11</sup> and finally, that Richards's insistence on the idea of form as the means for unification and the reconciliation of differences displays

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 358.

<sup>9</sup> Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 366.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 361.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 363.

a sense of 'nostalgia for the ordered life.'<sup>12</sup> Hartman then moves to consider the relation of literary history to the genius (the pure artistic intelligence) and the genius loci (the creative intellect as stemming from a particular historical time and place), which he relates to his search for a theory where the form of the artistic product corresponds to the form of the artist's historical consciousness. Hartman attempts a more optimistic take on Emerson's distrustful anticipation of 'the end of history as we know it' and concludes with a sense of promising expectancy for the development and future of literary history.<sup>13</sup>

Today, postmodern fiction transgresses traditional understandings of form with bold experimentation. Conventional literary structures are not simply revisited or rejected, but become transgressed and transformed. The challenges that the postmodern literary form presents correspond with the difficulty of distinguishing between the aesthetic and the historical. In postmodern fiction the concept of literary history may not be realized in the manner that Hartman has perhaps anticipated, since in the postmodern there is no restoration of faith in ideas of form or historical vocation. Nevertheless, the constant exceeding of implicit understandings of form and the contravention displayed in the structure of the postmodern text propose that the quest for a text that is both literary and historical is still central in literature. While postmodern literary theory oscillates between historical and aesthetic approaches in attempting to decipher the fundamentals that define a text as postmodern, the nature of the postmodern text constantly transgresses these notions. The problematic of merging the factual with the artistic in the literary text comes alive in postmodern fiction.

A postmodern text that is characteristic of this problematic is Irvine Welsh's *Filth*. In *Filth* the issue of fusing historical consciousness with artistic expression

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<sup>12</sup> Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 365.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 386.

could be identified as the central problematic behind the complexities of the text. The story is a first-person narrative of a police investigator who becomes involved in solving the case of a murder. Following the typical structure of the detective story, *Filth* begins with the announcement of a crime. The location of the crime, however, is significant: while the murder takes place in a staircase that unites the old town and the new part of Edinburgh, what becomes clear is that the 'old' form of the detective story is transgressed in the text. Notably, the detective here does not appear as the 'hero': Bruce, the protagonist, is entirely corrupt, despite his position as a representative of justice.<sup>14</sup> Equally strange are the repeated appearances of graphical representations of a tapeworm. As the main narration of the text becomes consumed by the tapeworm, a loss of 'evidence' takes place which effectively deflects from traditional readings of a detective story, where the reader seeks for clues to 'solve' the mystery of the murder. These distortions and disruptions challenge our reading. Furthermore, the use of the Scottish dialect adds to the complexities of this text. In using a dialect, the text records and expresses particular topical realities, which is an element characteristic of postmodern fiction. Yet, the Scottish dialect enforces a slower reading for non-native readers and while it evokes a sense of familiar locality and tradition, it also unsettles and alienates the global audience for which Welsh is writing. It is, however, through these clashes with different dialects, breaches of form and the transgression of traditional literary structures that *Filth* manages to relate historical elements and the unfamiliar or imaginative. Historical consciousness and artistic expression come together in *Filth*.

*Filth's* narrative becomes intensely disturbing. The complexities in Bruce's narration indicate a fusion of factuality and personal perception which bring the protagonist to the verge of schizophrenia. Bruce's first-person narrative reveals a

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<sup>14</sup> An older history of corrupted detectives in crime fiction has to be recognized at this point, as well as recent criticism that comes to question the motives of celebrated investigators. In *Filth*, however, Bruce's corruption is especially striking and overt.

condition of distrust, disorder and imbalance which becomes reflected through his split identity. The different voices and the coexistence of antagonistic qualities within Bruce and the text impart a desire for some sense of stability. *Filth* could thus be viewed as associating the postmodern condition with mental disease, yet by influencing and exploiting nostalgic apprehensions for a narrative that makes sense, for formation and resolution, *Filth* raises the question of whether it didactically interposes the 'evils' of the postmodern condition. Such a position, however, would overlook the complexities that arise from the merging of the historical and the factual in the text.

While postmodern literary theory approaches the postmodern turn as either a positive or negative progression from modernism or, an absolute rupture from modernistic concerns, the transgression of form in the postmodern text and the resulting difficulty of distinguishing the fictional from the historical link postmodern fiction to previous literary concerns. In 1970 Hartman sought to defend the ideas of form and historical consciousness for the artist. Today, postmodern fiction has clearly not reinstated trust in the aesthetic and the historical but it continues to confuse and complicate our apprehension of these concepts. The transgression of the fictive and the historical in the postmodern is not to support a possible failure in the realization of literary history, but it signals the continuation of the preoccupation with the coexistence of these notions. In the postmodern condition, globalization and its effects in history and the individual revive Hartman's aspiration for literary history while, at the same time, it appears that it is through this clash between the aesthetic and historical that postmodern literature emerges.

#### 4.2. Transgression and Filth.

Transgression has psychoanalytic, social, legal and religious connotations and *Filth* makes use of all of these undertones. An interpretation of *Filth* that focuses on just one of the meanings of transgression would be possible, yet the first-person narrative in the text makes the deciphering of such separate and detached arguments difficult. *Filth* weaves together the character of a corrupted police investigator who is racist, chauvinist and blatantly immoral. The unifying thread in this text is Bruce's narrative voice and it is the character of the protagonist that comes to personify and incarnate transgression in *Filth*. Bruce's narrative, however, lacks unity and suffers many intrusions. The form of the text changes to accommodate what initially appear as external voices: the graphics and narrative voices of tapeworms; the interruptions of Bruce's narration by the voice of his wife, which appears in short, separate, bold typed chapters; the rendering of different voices in parallel columns, which produces the effect of simultaneous action; the interception of different dialects; the reproduction of newspaper articles, graffiti or song lyrics. All of these elements cause fragmentation in Bruce's narration.

Central to *Filth* is the infraction of the law. In the text it is clear that a legal system is instructed yet its authority and application become problematic and distrustful. Bruce's professional conduct proposes that transgression emerges within and as an inherited part of the legal system. From stealing and 'framing' to alcohol and drug abuse, Bruce appears as a 'realistic' representative of the police force, breaching the myth of the respectable and ethical demeanour that is often associated with the investigator of a detective story. The realistic frame that *Filth* projects – that of a corrupted investigator – may well be an exploitation of contemporary junctures. The irony of having a representative of society's law breaking the law is an obvious



displacement, yet Bruce's narration presents this variation not as a singular irregularity but as natural and organic. Bruce's only rule, which is repeated throughout *Filth*, is that 'same rules apply'; the old lady who is a victim of theft, Bruce's coke dealer or his superior officer at the office all get the same treatment. Bruce steals from all of them. The apprehension of law, rules or conventions assumes a new meaning in *Filth*, what Bruce refers to as 'games'. Their secretive nature allows for the release of resentment, frustration, disapproval or the assertion of individuality through a subtle manner. In that sense, stealing from a defenceless old lady who has called Bruce to her house to report a theft, and leading her to think that she is disillusioned or insane in reporting that during his visit something other became absent, is not unlawful.<sup>15</sup> For Bruce, the investigator and thief, these sorts of games are the residues of a lost freedom. As the boundaries between private and professional life disintegrate, the 'games' become his only way of survival.<sup>16</sup> Morality collapses as the games take hold yet it is through this complete break up of boundaries between law and misconduct that *Filth* manages to transgress the limitations of the detective story.

The transgression of law in *Filth* corresponds with the transgression of the literary form that this text adopts, namely that of the detective story. *Filth's* experimentation is not only thematic but also textual. By obstructing the main narrative and the affirmation of evidence or clues with graphic interceptions, *Filth* violates the principles that characterize the mystery story and, consequently, it expands the reader's apprehension of the detective novel. Hartman examines the detective novel in his essay 'Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Novel', to suggest that the problem with traditional detective stories is that they become devoted to the leads that guide the reader to their resolution:

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<sup>15</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Filth* (London: Vintage, 1998), 9-20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

[O]ur eyes ache to read more, to see more, to know that the one just man (the detective) will succeed – yet when all is finished, nothing is rereadable. [...] Thus the trouble with the detective novel is not that it is moral but that it is moralistic; not that it is popular but that it is stylized; not that it lacks realism but that it picks up the latest realism and exploits it.<sup>17</sup>

In *Filth*, any anticipation for a final revelation becomes marginalized. The text does indeed exploit the ‘latest realism’ but only to transgress it through its distorted form. The present tense, first-person narrative becomes disrupted by intrusions of other, different narrative voices. The narrative voice of Toal, Bruce’s superior officer, is one example of the text’s accommodation of different narrative utterances. Toal endeavours to write a detective story himself, during his spare moments in the office. When Bruce steals what he believes to be the only script of that story, the text alters to reproduce and frame Toal’s story, as it is being read by the protagonist.

EXT. STREET. NEW YORK CITY. THURSDAY NIGHT, 3AM.

A solitary man is nervously walking down a darkened, cold, deserted street. He gives the odd furtive glance backwards as is he is concerned that he is being followed. He heads down towards the waterfront with the lights of Brooklyn Bridge visible ahead of him. Someone shouts and he turns around. As this happens, we see, in slow-motion, a youth with a crowbar running towards the

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 218. Hartman’s argument may also be applied to romance.

Fuck off Toal! What a load of shit! The cunt's just ripping off whatever current bastard case we're supposed to be solving and setting it in New York. That's no fuckin screenwriting!

I rip off the title page and the first two and stick them in the fire I've built. The last copy of Toal's masterwork and here it fuckin well goes! I decide to get down to some real writing and try the *News of the Screws* crossword.<sup>18</sup>

The opposition between the traditional genre of the mystery novel and *Filth* becomes obvious here. If Toal's script is representative of the conventional detective story then *Filth* and Bruce's response to Toal's text is indicative of the postmodern advance and its denunciation of set ideas about form and structure. The framing and the reproduction of Toal's script with the employment of a different typeset, reflect and embody this postmodern rejection. In that respect, for Bruce and for postmodernism, 'real writing' comes as the solving of a crossword; it entails clues, gaps and dimensional (horizontal and vertical) writing. These are the elements that register what appears as ineffective or obscure in the postmodern text and which act to localize the unacceptable or the ambiguous in the present tense and the immediacy of the here and now. 'Real writing' or postmodern writing is then favouring the process of writing, the documentation of seeking adequate ways of expression, rather than the presentation of a final product. What matters here is the 'game'; the solving rather than the solution.

Toal's story does indeed feed off a recent investigation. Bruce is assigned the investigation of the brutal murder of a young black journalist, Efan Wurie, the son of the ambassador of Ghana, who was in Edinburgh for only two days before being found brutally murdered with a claw hammer. Bruce appears to recognize the

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<sup>18</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 228. Among other things, the *News of the Screw* echo Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (London: Penguin Books, 1984). Parallels between *Filth* and James's mystery novel can be noted in terms of distorted perception.

similarities between his case and Toal's story because he is involved in the investigation. However, as it becomes clear in the last chapters of *Filth*, it is Bruce who has committed the murder of Wurie, in revenge for his wife's sexual relationship with the victim. Yet throughout *Filth*, Bruce's narrative does not indicate any sense of responsibility for the crime and he displays no consciousness of his murderous act. For Bruce, Wurie's murder is the result of social ramifications and racism in Edinburgh. For him, Wurie is not a victim but someone guilty of invading and threatening Bruce's territory. Wurie's death comes then more like a natural 'clean up' and the affirmation of unwritten cultural laws. Similarly, the burning of Toal's copy does not appear to be an attempt to destroy the evidence of his guilt. However, it is such violations that affirm Bruce's transgression in the text. Only after burning Toal's script does Bruce recall:

All I can think about is that boy's skull, bashed in, the way his head was caved in and how it wasn't like a heid at all, just like a broken silly puppet face, about how when you destroy something, when you brutalized it, it always looks warped and disfigured and slightly unreal and unhuman and that's what makes it easier for you to go on brutalizing it, go on fucking it and hurting it and mashing until you've destroyed it completely, proving that destruction is natural in the human spirit, that nature has devices to enable us to destroy, to make it easier for us; a way of making righteous people who want to act do things without the fear of consequence, a way of making us less than human, as we break the laws...<sup>19</sup>

These thoughts are the closest that one can get in search of a motive for justification of Bruce's action. The opening pages of *Filth* describe vividly the opening of the

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<sup>19</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 229.

victim's skull and the perpetrator's sense of completion after the vicious crime. Here, Bruce's acceptance of primitive instincts as intrinsic to freedom and the fulfilment of one's self within the environment of a regulating society justify Bruce's transgression. Bruce's 'job' (his cold assassination) appears to be the recognition and reception of these animalistic instincts.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, *Filth* recognizes and accommodates the animal within the human. It is no accident that the cover of the book pictures the face of a pig, which is often used to characterize policemen and in Judaism is associated with that which is unclean. *Filth* and the postmodern novel require the recognition of what contemporary society and culture disregard or overlook. Postmodern fiction incorporates that which is unacceptable and socially intolerable. Hence, the burning of Toal's script is more than a destruction of evidence; it is a symbolic act that celebrates the destruction of social constraints or demands while it becomes the starting point of the postmodern narrative. The dramatic disfiguration of the form of this text and the 'brutalization' of the narrative with graphic insertions are not cathartic. Instead, the breaking of structural 'laws' and the transgression of literary traditions are exposed as the formulating components of postmodern fiction.

Still, if transgression characterizes the postmodern narrative then it may also polarize the postmodern text between high value and entropy. Furthermore, what comes into question is where, if anywhere, does this display of destruction lead. Is *Filth* simply impressing on us the consequences of the loss of individuality, repression of identity or the 'evils' of the postmodern condition? *Filth* presents us with a creative and figurative merging of narrative voices that complicates the answer to this question. Bruce's narration becomes interrupted by graphic representations of a tapeworm that comes to develop inside his body. The tapeworm is a result of Bruce's bad hygiene and eating habits. The illustrations of the tapeworm 'infect', overtake and

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<sup>20</sup> 'There's no fear or regret but no elation or sense of triumph either. It's just a job that needs to be done.' Welsh, *Filth*, 2.

conceal the main narration. Moreover, the intervening larva assumes its own voice. Its first appearance occurs while Bruce is sleeping:

Sleep (00000000000000000000000000000000) and pleasant  
dreams that (00000000000000000000000000000000) urbed by the  
shite that yo (00000000000000000000000000000000) e Toal and his  
ilk ... no th (00000000000000000000000000000000) em; he thinks  
that he can do (00000000000000000000000000000000)  
No chance (00000000000000000000000000000000) I 00000  
(000I am00000000000000000000000000000000) I am a000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I am alive0000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I am alive0000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I am soft and I am weak000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I must grow00000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I must eat00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) I must grow strong0000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) eat00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) eat00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) eat eat0  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) eat eat eat eat eat 00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) eat00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000) big and strong00000000000000000000  
(00000000000000000000000000000000)  
...still fuck (00000000000000000000000000000000) hungry as fuck with  
my guts rumbling away. It's darkness and I'm in bed. I don't  
remember going to bed. This is unusual for me. I sense the space  
beside me and I grab at her dressing gown and hold it tightly. It still

has her smell. I'd let it go in the night and I had the bad dreams as a result. I've also been inadvertently clawing at my balls because they are nipping something terrible.

My head feels broken and weak, like it's been smashed open and its contents spilt all over the pillow.<sup>21</sup>

While Bruce's reaction on waking up reminds us of a child fearful of the dark, the voice of the tapeworm echoes in the text almost as a rhyming lullaby.<sup>22</sup> The tapeworm's voice could be thought of as an expression of Bruce's suppressed unconscious, which assumes a physical body and a voice only to invade the narrative, dividing the text and making the reading of the main account impossible. This typological transgression may figure Bruce's contravention and lapse. The birth of the infection may be approached as the embodiment of Bruce's transgressive nature, as the worm and Bruce's subordinate nature become gradually and in parallel more overt. Yet as the perpetrator becomes the victim of an intrusion, the diseased worm can also be thought of either as accountable for Bruce's progressive demise or as his punishment. The parasitic worm overtakes the narration of his host, whether as an intrusion or as the physical expression of a psychoanalytical mirroring, demanding consumption for its survival.<sup>23</sup> From that point on, the more Bruce eats, the larger the tapeworm becomes and its voice becomes gradually more coherent, offering its own insights to Bruce's character and position. As a result, the transgressive element of the worm does not simply reflect Bruce's psychological state but initiates a new narrative within reproductions of a new form.

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<sup>21</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> "I am soft and I am weak / I must grow / I must eat" Ibid. 24.

<sup>23</sup> "Parasite" comes from the Greek, *parasitos*, etymologically: "beside the grain," *para*, beside (in this case) plus *sitos*, grain, food. "Sitology" is the science of foods, nutrition, and diet. "Parasite" was originally something positive, a fellow guest, someone sharing the food with you, there with you beside the grain.' J. Hillis Miller "The Limits of Pluralism III: The Critic as Host", *Critical Inquiry*, 3.3 (1977): 439-447, (444).

The infiltrating voice of the worm, which reaches us through the vacant space of zeroes within Bruce's body, may also suggest an exceeding of the boundaries of Bruce's own identity. The hidden tapeworm coming into life signals another concealed deliverance. Bruce suppresses his feelings for his separation with his wife, Carole, who, as he tells friends, has left to visit her ill mother in Sydney. The frequent disruptions of Carole's voice in the text, which appear in short chapter entries, bold typed, in the first person and in the present tense, seem then inexplicable, particularly since Bruce's self-absorbed narration suggests a very low opinion of his wife and of women in general. Considering his generally disrespectful and diminishing view of women, it comes as a surprise that in this instance Bruce finds comfort in the scent of femininity. Holding on to his wife's dressing gown indicates more than his feelings of abandonment. The comfort Bruce feels by a woman's scent and the 'clawing' of his genitals are the first indications that signal a reflection of his complex sexual identity.

*Filth* makes explicit that the violation of boundaries and transgression are key for its narration and for the postmodern novel. As the limitations of the factual and the imaginative become exceeded and overlapped in *Filth*, what becomes clear is that distinguishing between the real and the fictive in the postmodern novel is challenging. It is, however, this question that reveals the depths of transgression that gives birth to postmodern fiction. *Filth*'s anti-hero and textual experimentation do not come to didactically impress the evils of the postmodern condition. Rather, *Filth* becomes submerged and focused on exploring the undertones of transgression to expose the breaching of limitations as a vital element for the creation of the postmodern novel and a detective story like no other.



#### 4.3. Interpretation and Nosology.

Interpretation proceeds from analysis and elucidation. Exegetical and explicative acts often make use of sociological, cultural and psychoanalytic findings, amongst others, in their process of conceptualization. Hartman's *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text* is a reflection on the effects of psychoanalysis upon literary interpretation. In his own contributing essay "Psychoanalysis: The French Connection", Hartman analyses Jacques Derrida's *Glas* and considers whether psychoanalytic criticism may provide a mode for a more intensive, closer reading. Hartman notes that the two columns that compose the text in *Glas* arrange Derrida's reflections on Hegel and Genet respectively. In *Glas* and in relation to psychoanalysis, Hegel's column signals the paternal figure, an expression of Hegel's vision of a 'philosopher who has internalized history' and of absolute knowledge, the unmediated merging of person and truth.<sup>24</sup> Hartman contrasts Hegel's assimilation of person and truth to 'the exact obverse of the naïve immediacy Hegel calls "abstract" and which the absolute thinker sees filled or made concrete by historical experience in its very negativity, its morcellating if also self-healing movement.'<sup>25</sup> The medical term of morcellation, which refers to the surgical removal of small pieces, as in the cases of brain tumors, and which Hartman associates with Hegel's notion of abstract historical truth, evokes an understanding of the non-figurative or conceptual as illness or disease. This manifestation of conceptuality as illness echoes the discussion on Genet in *Glas*. Hartman suggests, via Derrida, that Genet's discourse opposes Hegel's in offering the projection of a phantom mother whose image lacks both actuality ("Eigentlichkeit") and sense.<sup>26</sup> For Derrida, Genet's discourse of the phantom mother is 'at once pure

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed. *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Hartman, *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 100.

and guilty': pure since her image cannot be 'stained' and guilty because of her capacity of incorporating everything, as another thief, in Derrida's terms.<sup>27</sup> Hartman concludes by suggesting that Derrida views psychoanalysis as remaining logocentric: 'a displaced religious or metaphysical discourse in search of the logos or "nom unique," of a single defining wound for which life, or else death, is the cure.'<sup>28</sup> *Glas* illuminates the psychoanalytic insistence on identifying and fixing a person's truth to sexual drives, perversion and transgression. For Derrida and Hartman, psychoanalytic interpretation appears rooted in seeking the 'wound' and its cure.

In discussing Genet's contaminated image of creativity and Hegel's vision of absolute knowledge in *Glas*, Hartman's reading of Derrida appears to correspond with his concept of literary history and the possible coexistence of the conceptual (Genet) and the historical (Hegel). Hartman's analysis of *Glas* evokes his earlier concern with literary history and the potential production of a text that is both historical and fictive. For Hartman, Derrida's attempt with *Glas* is not to contrast the two by setting Hegel against Genet's discourse but to formulate 'a hermeneutics of indeterminacy.'<sup>29</sup> Whether *Glas* comes to realise Hartman's wish for a text that is both literary and historical is a separate issue. What Hartman clearly recognizes in "Psychoanalysis: The French Connection" is Derrida's affirmation of the significance of a multiplicity of possible interpretations for the literary text.

If in *Glas* Derrida portrays Genet's approach to the conceptual as malady, Hartman's essay 'From the Sublime to the Hermeneutic' becomes preoccupied with Hegel's fixation on absolute knowledge and its effects on literary interpretation. Hegel's wish for a total definition is approached with caution by Hartman. Reflecting on literary reading, Hartman counsels that '[i]nterpretation that reduces words to clues or symptoms is in danger of becoming *nosology* and making us spies, doctors,

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<sup>27</sup> Hartman, *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, 101, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 102.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 101.

debunkers, archaeologists.’<sup>30</sup> Critical analysis that seeks to identify the wrongdoings of a text sets the interpreter as a practitioner. For Hartman, Hegel’s desire for knowing something absolutely suggests a fixation with reasoning, classifying and dealing with the transgressions of a text. Seeking the text’s ‘maladies’ evokes for Hartman nosology rather than interpretative readings. Nosology, as the study and science of illnesses and diseases, is a discipline that focuses on categorizing, rationalizing and explaining medical conditions. What Hartman proposes by his reference to nosology is that identifying the evidence or symptoms of transgression in a literary text should not be the driving force of interpretative acts. To reduce interpretation to the seeking of indications of malfunction and to focus on the text’s failings or deficiencies would assume the possibility of ‘curing’ a text to comply and accord it to a literary archetype, a literary paradigm set on the pedestal of literature in its totalizing perfection.

Hartman’s warning against interpretative acts that derive from the deciphering of literary inklings of errors or inadequacies advocates interpretation that does not seek to identify the ‘maladies’ of a text. Hartman suggests that such nosologic or ‘pharmaceutical’ interpretative acts turn the interpreter into a spy, doctor, debunker or archaeologist. His reference to these ‘professions’ comes perhaps to emphasize the scientific modes of expression involved in such discourse. What these distinct vocations all have in common is their application of particular vocabularies.

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<sup>30</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, 121. Also relevant at this point is Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur’s dialectical device distinguishes between two forms of hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of faith, which aims to restore meaning, and the hermeneutics of suspicion, which aims to extract meanings that are ‘hidden’ in the text. Significantly, Ricoeur seeks to hold that all hermeneutics involve a level of suspicion, in challenging the truth claims and meanings of the text. For Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion, see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy: Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009). Also, see Gadamer’s essay “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion”, which proceeds from responding to the central question: ‘Is not every form of hermeneutics a form of overcoming an awareness of suspicion?’ (313). Hans -Georg Gadamer, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion”, *Man and World*, 17. 3-4, (1984): 313-323.

Furthermore what characterizes spies, doctors, debunkers and archaeologists is an obvert preoccupation with deciphering and exposing a transgression, an illness, an assertion or an origin. For Hartman, directed and methodological identification or excoriation should not be associated with interpretative readings. Such pointed analytical approaches become curative and threaten to deflate the magic or enchantment of the literary text.

If the interpreter refrains from reductively recognizing the text's transgressive elements, then the question arises of how interpretation should ensue. In the case of postmodern fiction this question is intensified by the difficulty postmodern literary theory faces in defining postmodern literature. Postmodern criticism continues to identify the elements that characterize the postmodern text by juxtaposition and comparison. The definition of postmodernism appears in correlation to earlier to earlier literary developments, traditions and discourses.<sup>31</sup> How are we to read the postmodern text if not by attending and attesting to what differentiates it from the past? The nature of the postmodern text is built on transgression, experimentation and the decline of falling back on established modes of expression. If the interpreter of the postmodern text completely abstains from judgemental or diagnostic readings, then the challenges that the reading of postmodern fiction presents would remain unchallenged. At the same time, the identification of postmodern elements in a literary text runs the risk of becoming nosologic.

The ultimate challenge that the postmodern text presents us with, then, is whether it is possible to read a text without seeking to identify its entropy: the text's 'offences' towards literary traditions, its breaches of forms, infractions, destructions

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<sup>31</sup> 'For Foucault, the end of the individual is interpreted archaeologically as the death of man in an emerging posthumanist framework, and genealogically as the fabrication of the individual within disciplinary technologies. While for critical theory the diminishing of individuality is brought about by the capitalist economy, its culture industries, and modes of social control, for Foucault the death of man is a discursive event occurring with the emergence of new sciences and discourses, and the sociological fate of the individual in a normalizing, disciplinary society.' Best, Kellner, eds. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, 218.

or lapses. Hartman's warning against nosological readings is especially acute in the course of the analysis of postmodern fiction: what is always embedded in the nature of the postmodern text is its simultaneous advance and defiance of modernist literary conventions. The following section attempts to examine whether it is possible to interpret a postmodern text like *Filth* without seeking to illuminate its entropy or seeking moralistic or curative readings.

#### **4.4. Transgression and Stealth.**

As the contravention of explicit or implicit rules, transgression presupposes the existence of set and fixed notions. For transgression to take place boundaries and limitations are required. These limitations become set in *Filth* in an unorthodox manner: it is only after their transgression that the reader becomes aware of set boundaries. *Filth* does not begin with the assumption of set rules, apart from one: only transgression appears as an imperative. As a result, Bruce's first person and present tense narrative sets the reader in a trailing mode: in *Filth* we constantly seek to decipher the boundaries that become exceeded between the inner and the public, lies and facts, the real and the imaginative. These ambiguities turn the reader into the position of a spy. In following the narration, the reader feels compelled to follow Bruce in his transgression, participate in his crimes and accept *Filth*'s breaches of form. This agreement, of course, comes with the expectation of a reward, a resolution and the anticipation of the prevalence of justice. To some extent, this anticipation is fulfilled with Bruce's death, yet his suicide does not come as a consequence of his guilt about Wurie's murder or his other criminal actions but as the result of his failure to fit in an organized society. By the end of the novel, Bruce appears victimized, his only crime being his rejection or failure to be 'normal'. Instead of the catharsis of justice, *Filth* ends with a reversal: the reader becomes sympathetic to a criminal and is

left questioning the unwritten rules and laws that organize social life. In *Filth* transgression instigates the questioning of the pressures and effects social rules and legislation have on the appropriation of the individual.

Despite the entropy that characterizes *Filth* both in textual and contextual terms, towards the end the novel appears to emphasize a wish for communion and union. When Bruce enters his local shopping centre with the pretext of Christmas shopping and while being under the influence of drugs, he appears to deliberately and desperately seek eye contact with strangers:

...the vacant procession of sheep up the escalator...the big cow you  
want to just scream GIES A FUCKIN SHAG at or even just look at me  
please police please please look at me

And I feel the hand on my arm and somebody's asking if I am  
alright sir and I pull away and whip out my ID and snarl: - Police!  
Please me like I please you ... and then I move away through the  
house of the lord this great temple of worship to our God of Christian  
givingness spendingness consumer expenditure business  
competitiveness shop and cheat deathness and into the street where the  
excluded jakeys beg for pennies ...

*last night I said those words to poor Ray*

*Our Shirl she reckon's you're a crap lay*

*Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off, fuck off please police me oh yeah*

*Like I police you*<sup>32</sup>

Bruce remains critical of a society that becomes identified by consumption yet he still seeks to relate with the ordinary, typical and regular commonality. It is this normality that has assumed the place of the unattainable and distant 'other' for Bruce. His

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<sup>32</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 271.

‘passport’ for this sort of union becomes his police badge; but in return for the protection he offers, Bruce seeks to be protected himself, to become integrated, accepted and regulated. In renouncing his position and power, Bruce seeks not to control but to be controlled and compromised. The lyrics he recites are a play on the song ‘Please Please me’.<sup>33</sup> Bruce’s pleasure, desire and wish is to be policed, adjusted and regulated; in other words, to be included and in unison with what he perceives as normal.

There are other expressions of Bruce’s need to belong, which become characterized by a similar, simultaneous understanding of social division and the necessity of inclusiveness. Bruce refers often to the ‘masons’ and his freemasonry beliefs, and his comments indicate a clear sense of gratification received from being associated with and trusted by the group. Bruce appears to feel comfortable and safe only within the intelligible, concrete structures of the secret society. Controversially, his association with the masons becomes significant in the text not for spiritual but for more corporeal reasons: the masons are where Bruce goes to obtain pornographic videotapes. While the search for sexual gratification emulates or replaces a spiritual search, the desire for communion and security are sustained. While religious beliefs offer the fulfilment of belonging to a particular faith, pornography offers to Bruce the pleasure of relating and release, feelings that become particularly intensified by the privacy and intimacy of watching the tapes in the comfort of his home (his temple). This voyeurism does not impart the fulfilment of connection which Bruce appears to be seeking, but it comes close and in a secretive fashion without requiring any efforts or compromises from his side. In this, Bruce comes to associate his ‘survival’ with concealment and secrecy.

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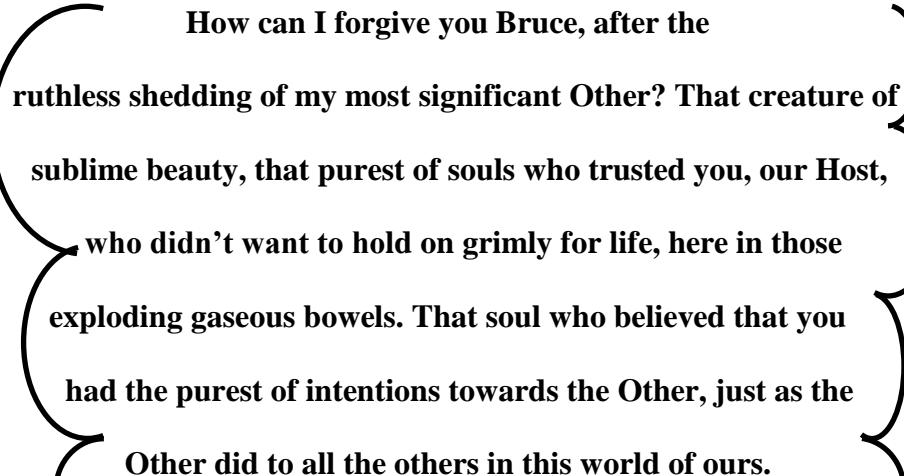
<sup>33</sup> ‘Last night I said these words to my girl / I know you never even try girl / Come on, come on, come on, come on, / Please please me oh yeh like I please you.’ The Beatles, ‘Please Please me’, released in the UK in 1963.

Bruce continuously moves in stealth. As a policeman, he manages to conceal his racism and he believes his misogyny to be undetected. Yet Bruce's undisclosed proceedings extend beyond his social interactions to become self-directed. His covertness becomes self-inflicting as he negates his own identity and personal history. Bruce's narration reveals no consciousness of his transgressions and it is only in the final chapters of *Filth* that revelations about his motives and past become exposed. After the revelation of Carol's affair with Wurrie, Carole, taking their daughter Stacey, filed for divorce and left the marital home. Bruce then secretly murdered Wurrie. Yet far more becomes revealed about Bruce's childhood: Bruce was raised by his mother, Molly and his step father, Ian, tormented by questions about the identity of his real father who he was told, had died. Unlike his half-brother, Stevie, Bruce was not popular or much liked as a child, something that he became quickly aware of but failed to comprehend. After a tragic accident while playing with Stevie, his little brother died in front of Bruce's eyes. Ian, accusing Bruce for Stevie's death, sent him away to live with his grandmother. During that time, another tragic accident claimed the life of Bruce's first girlfriend. Growing older, Bruce became more isolated. After school, he found work at the pits where he learned that his real father is not dead but a rapist who suffered from acute schizophrenia, depression and anxiety attacks and who also raped his mother. Molly's boyfriend at the time, Ian, decided to be supportive, marry her and save her from both the sin of terminating the pregnancy and the disgrace of giving birth unmarried. After joining the police force, Bruce tracked down his real father in prison, visited him and violently attacked him leaving him almost dead. In the last pages of *Filth*, Bruce's greatest fear is exposed: he worries that he will become like his monstrous father. What Bruce chooses to forget by starting a family with Carole is his evil descendant; a father who he considers has predetermined his nature and future with his schizophrenic seed. By erasing the



memories of his childhood, Bruce tragically fulfils his destiny as the son of a wicked man and becomes exactly what he feared he would.

The revelations of these personal and significant events of Bruce's life come through the narratives of Carole and the tapeworm. The sudden insertions of Carole's voice in separated chapters divide Bruce's narrative to offer significant insight about his character as a companion and husband, highlighting Bruce's virtues. The interruptions of the tapeworm, however, expand and become more critical of Bruce. While initially the tapeworm appears concerned solely with basic instincts of survival, it gradually alters and grows, revealing more acute awareness and greater intelligence.<sup>34</sup> Slowly, it becomes conscious of the existence of another worm: 'I can feel the one I must now refer to as The Other. I am not alone.'<sup>35</sup> The appearance of 'The Other' relieves the tapeworm's feelings of loneliness and purposeless existence and it excites it with the possibilities of communion and synthesis. When, though, Bruce's body extracts 'The Other', the surviving tapeworm appears agitated:

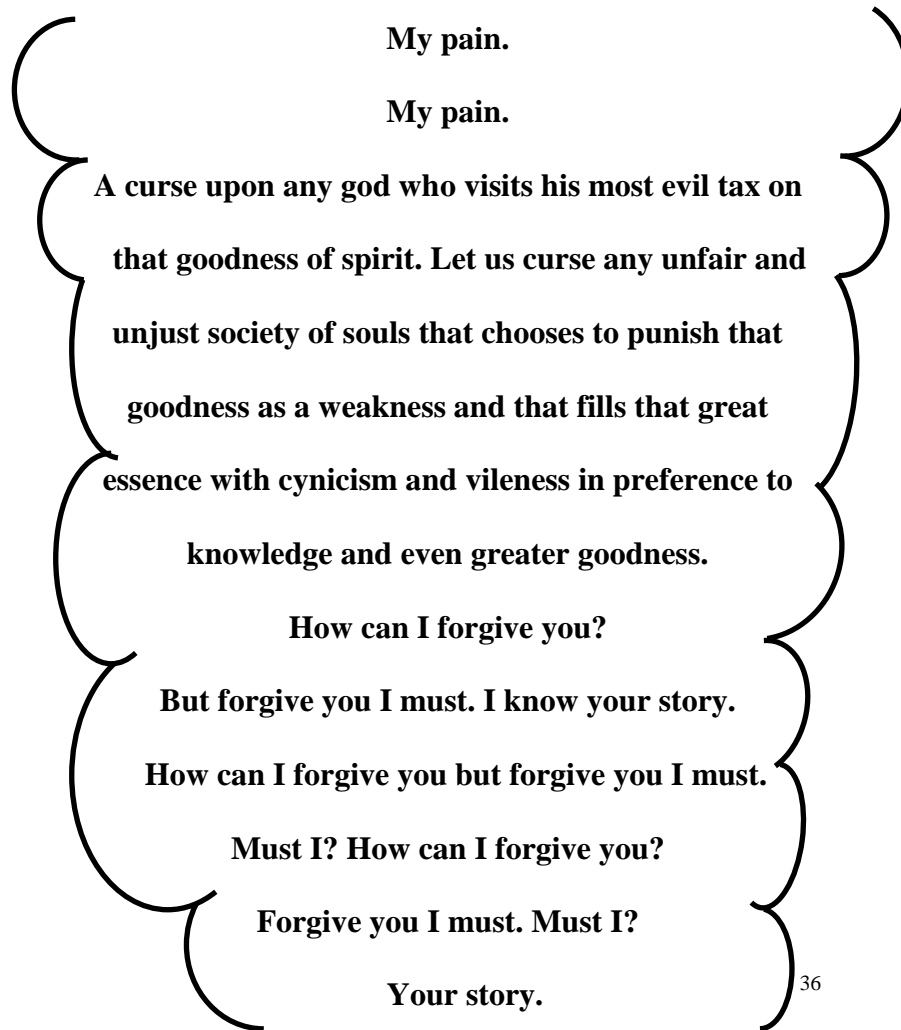


**How can I forgive you Bruce, after the  
ruthless shedding of my most significant Other? That creature of  
sublime beauty, that purest of souls who trusted you, our Host,  
who didn't want to hold on grimly for life, here in those  
exploding gaseous bowels. That soul who believed that you  
had the purest of intentions towards the Other, just as the  
Other did to all the others in this world of ours.**

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<sup>34</sup>Within the graphics of the worm's body which introduce its narrative we read: 'Oh yes, I can conceive of my body as that simple structure: input, process, output. [...] but I know for sure that the complexity of soul doesn't even start to approximate the basic organism that is my body. I just know this because I feel it, I feel it in my essence, which I must trust as much as any limited sense data I acquire from my environment. So what can I call myself then? Well, all I can call myself is the Self, to be quite strict about it. But there has got to be more to this whole puzzle than just my beautiful Self. I somehow conceive the wee fancy that I'm living inside another organism. The environment is another creature, a host, no less. We can refer to it as Host.' (70) Later on, the worm identifies its host as Bruce, learning and using his name for the first time to request more food: 'eat Bruce / eat it all up'. Welsh, *Filth*, 214.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 230.



Despite the silent existence of ‘The Other’, the tapeworm presupposes not only its innocence and purity but also its sacrifice, assuming that it had the power to survive but it chose not to. This echoes the Christian example of the sacrifice of Christ to relieve the sins of humanity. The tapeworm’s call for condemning transgression and wickedness expresses a sense of unification through a common pursuit of righteousness but what follows is the realization that forgiveness is necessary. This is a realization that Bruce fails to apprehend. Despite his quest for love and acceptance, Bruce, unable to forgive, fails to recognize the significance of absolution in his desire for a harmonious integration to communal life.

The story that the tapeworm proceeds to narrate illuminates his life as a quest for survival and, thus, as parasitic. Bruce, despite coming from a mining community

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<sup>36</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 260-261.

and working at the pits, chooses to join the police force and fight against the mineworkers during the Thatcher years. His choice is explicated in the tapeworm's narration: 'The important thing was to be on the winning side; if you can't beat them join them. Only the winners or those sponsored by them write the history of the times. That history decrees that *only the winners have a story worth telling*.'<sup>37</sup> The concept of history proposed here is the accumulation of success. If triumph dictates the characterization of an event as historical then, consequently, serenity, inaction and peace appear undervalued.<sup>38</sup> Morality seems irrelevant and, as distinctions between virtue and evil evaporate, what appears to prevail and order history is survival. While some literature becomes directed by teleological affirmations of what Lyotard calls grand narratives (as in the case of the detective story, where we have the recreation of a master narrative that can explicate everything), postmodern fiction comes to question what a 'story worth telling' is. Transgression allows then the consideration of both the historical and that which history forgets. Historical consciousness is then not just the awareness of past events but also the realization of the parasitic side of humanity. In this, *Filth* enacts the struggle that characterizes the postmodern condition: while the acceptance of literary traditions appears vital for the affirmation of creativity, it is the rejection or the exceeding of these traditions that composes the postmodern text.

In *Filth*, the concern in both the surviving and the overlooked elements of history come to a crossroad. In the final chapters of *Filth*, the voice of Carole and the tapeworm are revealed as belonging to Bruce. Bruce goes for a night out, dressed up with his wife clothes and assuming her personality and voice, when he becomes the target of a group of youth that capture him and violently beat him. It is during his beating that Bruce becomes conscious, for the first time, of his stealth as the 'stealing'

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<sup>37</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 261, my italics.

<sup>38</sup> See John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (London: Longman, 1998). It has been critically acknowledged that in *Paradise Lost* action becomes centred on the evil forces.

of the identity of his wife.<sup>39</sup> When his attackers lock Bruce in a room and set the house he is in on fire, he manages to escape by jumping out of a window. Seriously injured and half unconscious, he becomes aware of his police colleagues at the scene of the crime, who are astonished by Bruce's double identity. The public revelation of his alternate personality leads to another assimilation. While on his way to the hospital the graphic of the worm appears once more to narrate the story of Stevie's death. But, for the first time, a dialogue occurs between Bruce and the tapeworm, which signifies Bruce's apprehension of yet another aspect of his divided personality. Later and while recovering at his house, the dialogues between Bruce and the tapeworm become more frequent and intensified.

We are alone. We switch on the television. There is nothing on

(000000you loved once 000000before Carole00000)

No. We love only ourselves.

(00000000you loved once00000000surely everybody does00000)

No. This is not us. We are thinking of somebody else.

(00000Rhona000000Rhona000000Rhona000000)

Rhona

We have to think of Rhona. The mob of hate reminded me, always the mob of hate. There were the pit villagers and then Gorman and Settrington's thugs. In between them, another mob. Who?

No, it does us no good to think of that.

(00000000000000000000why not00000000000000000000)  
(00000000000000000000why not00000000000000000000)

because it's done and it's in the fuckin past

(0000000000000000think of food then00000000000000000000)

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<sup>39</sup> Stealth: archaic, to steal.

(000000000000000000000000lovely, lovely grub000 )

I can't even eat a thing<sup>40</sup>

Up to this point, Bruce's, Carole's and the tapeworm's narratives appear in the text as distinctive, interior monologues. Here, we witness the unification or communion of those voices in Bruce's conscious self. This merge, however, does not alter Bruce's perception of his self as fragmented, since despite being aware of the origin of these voices, he appears unable to clear them off his mind. This, of course, is an indication of schizophrenia and paranoia but what these dialogic interactions illuminate is Bruce's requirement of an 'other' for the acceptance and integration of his personal history. It is significant then that historical accounts of Bruce's life appear in the text through disease and the infectious body of the tapeworm that never stops to fight for its survival. Keeping in mind Hartman's commentary on *Glas*, the tapeworm in *Filth* may be thought of as indicative of Hegel's column, which signifies the paternal, the internalization of history and the fusion of person and truth. The fact that historical consciousness appears in *Filth* as malady is suggestive of a postmodern perception of history, where the internalizing of history opens up to the recognition of the parasitic aspects of man. Carole's narrative or Bruce's assimilation and assumption of her identity may then be considered in terms of Genet's discourse, which becomes suggestive of the image of the all-incorporating, phantom mother to signify the conceptual. Bruce appears then similar to the body of postmodern fiction where historical consciousness and the conceptual or fictive come together.

While dialogically interacting, there is no unification of the fictive and the historical in *Filth*. Bruce's suicide in the final pages of the novel reflects a 'spillage' that postulates finalization or the fixation of such unity. His death takes place the moment that Stacey, his daughter, unexpectedly enters the room. Stacey witnesses her

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<sup>40</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 367.

father's hanging but is unable to hear his inaudible inner cry: 'STACEY PLEASE GOD BE SOMETHING ELSE SOMEONE ELSE...'<sup>41</sup> Bruce's fear is that Stacey will come to be as him, unable to fit in or be socially accepted, yet his final words also suggest that his schizophrenia is inherited, that Stacey will also have to compromise herself and construct alternate identities in order to survive. In the face of this, any hope of unification is eradicated, since paranoia appears to endure death and escape finalization. In 'Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye', Jerry Aline Flieger suggests that the postmodern text 'reflects a free-floating paranoia.'<sup>42</sup> Stacey's inheritance appears to be the preservation and continuation of the challenges that the postmodern condition presents us with.

#### **4.5. Conclusion: Failing Real Fiction.**

Today, postmodern literature becomes identified in relation to the modernist tradition. The theoretical dispute about the definition of postmodernism emerges through its apprehension as either the progression (post-) of modernist concerns or as a complete rupture from literary tradition. Consequently, it is the recognition of transgressive elements that aids the theoretical definition of postmodern literature. Postmodern fiction's transgression suggests that the struggle that defined literary history is still at hand and the same problematic of the reconciliation of historical consciousness with form appears to define the emergence of the postmodern narrative. In *The Fate of Reading*, Hartman suggests that '[The] reconciliation is to be real, not formal.'<sup>43</sup> In the postmodern condition we are faced with a demand for the real (*real* writing, *real* people) but, at the same time, the excess of information that characterizes our times, makes the distinction between the real and fiction impossible (or even irrelevant).

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<sup>41</sup> Welsh, *Filth*, 393.

<sup>42</sup> Jerry Aline Flieger, "Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye", *New Literary History*, 28.1 (1997): 89.

<sup>43</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, 108.

This chapter has attempted to trace the relation of transgression to historical consciousness and tradition and examine the complications that transgression presents in the process of interpretation. The concern with situating the artistic identity within a historical context, which preoccupied the theoretical work of Hartman and defines the concept of literary history and the emergence of a text that is both fictive and historical, survives in postmodern fiction. This is not to suggest that literary history becomes realized in postmodern fiction, but rather that the preoccupation with form and historical consciousness becomes rejuvenated by the postmodern use of the concept of transgression. *Filth* exemplifies the wish for a fusion of historical understanding with experimentation and imaginative expressions and this aspiration becomes communicated in the text through expressions of transgression. In this, *Filth* does not exploit contravention to express nostalgia for a narrative that makes sense. By transgressing the limitations of detective fiction with the graphics of the tapeworm and the displacing and violation of the boundaries between law and misconduct, *Filth* collapses the boundaries between the fictive and the factual. The resulting difficulty in identifying the historical and the aesthetic is indicative of postmodern fiction. Postmodern literature attends to the process of exploring these concepts, offering figurations of their approach and interlacing and without the conclusions of teleological positions.

The interpretative challenges that issue from the reading of postmodern fiction are many. If the interpreter refrains from recognizing the postmodern text's transgressive elements, then the question arises of whether it is possible to read a text without seeking to identify its entropy, its breaches of form and its violation of literary traditions. In the face of these challenges, postmodern criticism continues to seek to identify the elements that characterize a text as postmodern by classification and association. Hartman's warning against nosological interpretative acts and his

upholding of the significance of a multiplicity of possible interpretations for the literary text becomes all the more relevant, particularly since *Filth* transposes the reader as another detective. As Flieger suggests, unlike the modernists, postmodern writers

do not just rehearse the vicissitudes of self-referentiality. Rather than being absorbed in the sublimity of their own interior world – however tormented – the postprotagonists of these writers seem to be menaced from without, haunted by cryptic characters, at once ubiquitous and maddeningly elusive, sinister shadows which the hero can't quite figure, or finger. The minds of these protagonists take on the riddle of life, and are persecuted by it, not with a metaphysical modern nausea, but with the compulsion of detectives of sorts, driven by an urge to figure things out.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, as the last pages of *Filth* suggest and as the postmodern condition proposes, things are not to be 'figured out'. In the final pages of *Filth*, as the voices of the protagonist, his wife and the tapeworm come together, the fictive and the historical come close but their fusion remains elusive. It is this failing, however, that allows for the possibility of multiple interpretations. While *Filth's* ending suspends the fixed unification of the creative with the historical, transgression revives the wish of literary history.

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<sup>44</sup> Jerry Aline Flieger, "Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye", *New Literary History*, 28.1 (1997): 90.



## Chapter 5

### The Text, the Step and the Walk

‘My problem is that I have no home base,  
that a diasporic and disseminative fling  
is all I can offer.’<sup>1</sup>

This chapter focuses on the concept of travel and its manifestations in postmodern literature and Hartman’s critical contribution. After a brief overview of the figure of the traveller in literature, I introduce Brad Listi’s postmodern novel *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* (2006) in order to explore what forms the relationship between a literal and an intellectual journey takes in postmodern fiction. The second part of this chapter draws on writings by Hartman that revisit his intellectual movements and progress to examine how the protagonist’s description of his journey and his memoirs of his travels become suggestive of an intellectual journey. In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* topographical descriptions and intellectual thought processes become intermixed through typographical experimentation. The effect is suggestive of a merging of memories and future progression, stasis and the necessity of progress in the postmodern condition. The third part focuses more closely on the text’s typographical experimentation to examine whether its frequent insertions of lists, directions and dictionary definitions may act as sojourns within an intellectual progression. I will argue that these terminological references act as intellectual stops. Yet, instead of clarifying, the definitions of the text complicate its interpretation, by mediating and leading to different and diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Benjamin in Hope”, *Critical Inquiry*, “*Angelus Novus*: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin.” 25.2 (1999):344-352, (351).

meanings that affect the reading of the text. In exploring these meanings, the section “Revelations: About *Deferring Declamations*” comes to focus on and examine the relation of memoir writing and critical writing for both Hartman’s criticism and postmodern critical writings. Postmodern critique relies on the remembering (or forgetting) of tradition in attempting to reveal and unravel the nature of the postmodern condition. Hartman’s criticism may be significant in placing this difficulty of postmodern critical writing in a larger scope and in what Hartman identifies as the artist’s continuous struggle for authenticity.

### **5.1. Starting Points.**

One of the earliest novels in English literature introduces a journey of exploration. John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World of That Which is to Come*, begins with Christian’s departure from his hometown, the City of Destruction, in search of the Celestial City. Unable to convince his family to follow him from ‘*This World*’ to ‘*That Which is to Come*’, Christian abandons his home because of an awakened awareness of his sin, an affliction aroused by a book he comes to hold (the Bible). His burden can only be disposed of when he passes the Wicket Gate, which opens the ‘straight and narrow’ way to the Celestial City. Christian’s travels are directed by this quest for deliverance. His advancing steps take him from one encounter to the next until he is finally relieved of his burden at the place of Deliverance. From there, Christian sets off once more, seeking entrance to the Celestial City. On his way there and after passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he finds himself prosecuted at the Vanity Fair, counselled and induced to commit suicide at the Doubting Castle and struggling to pass the River of Death. But, as with the place of Deliverance, the arrival to the Celestial City does not signal the end of his story as this is only the end of the first part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Since *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the travelers in fiction have been plenty: the protagonists

of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Guevera's *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*, to name a few, indicate an interest in Odyssean journeys, a concern that appears to have moved along with the development of literature. The theme of a traveller seems to encourage a linear narrative and such an advance appears often as a fertile *topos* for the makings of a novel. When narrative time and narrative action move hand in hand with topographical progression, the narrative development may also easily accommodate and reflect the mappings of a conceptual journey.<sup>2</sup> As literature develops, the ties between linear narrative time and movement through locations become more relaxed and often secondary to a more acute concentration to the mappings of intellectual thought, as in the case of the modern novel. Modernism's stream of consciousness is a mode that relies primarily on the depiction of internal thoughts. Disjoined from timelines and unbounded from the specificities of place, the mappings of the modern novel are those of internal realities and personal thought process. In its turn, postmodern fiction reveals a more complicated relation to the early figure of the solitary discoverer. The postmodern novel intertwines time and the rendering of conceptual reflections in perplexing ways, reflecting the plethora of information and fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern condition. By re-engaging narrative time with place and the actualities or realities of everyday life, the postmodern text challenges traditional notions of travels in fiction. In postmodern literature, the relation of the journey to time may not always be linear but unlike modernism's stream of consciousness, the relation of the traveler to place is consistently emphasized and re-enforced by a more attentive approach to the situating of the protagonist.

Brad Listi's bestselling novel *Attention.Deficit.Disorder* is a postmodern text indicative

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* is a travel book that explores the relation of actual events to observation and critique; D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* was inspired by the author's travels to Sicily and Sardinia; and Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet*, a story of escape and survival, is another autobiographical travel narrative.

of a localization that does not issue from descriptive or picturesque depictions. Here, the relation to location instigates not only personal reflection but also the re-evaluation of apprehensions and information. Listi's novel reflects the fact that in postmodern fiction, the clear establishment of a cultural or historical setting does not ensure an unambiguous progression. The employment of textual experimentation makes it challenging to decipher the course of the literal journey and the evasion of a final destination distracts from the journey's original purpose. To this point, the addition of metatextual elements and historical information in the text transforms the figure of the postmodern traveler, from that of the adventurer and the discoverer of truths, to that of the roamer or drifter.<sup>3</sup> Hartman could similarly be thought of as critical drifter. In his recent publication, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*, he introduces the concept of intellectual journeys to explicate his interpretative approach. Hartman's theory and style are characteristic of an unsettledness that avoids polarization or conclusions and thrives on elusion. This chapter attempts to explore both Hartman's and postmodernism's intellectual journeys, their relation to place and location and the effects of the evasion of arrival.

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<sup>3</sup> *House of Leaves* presents us with the use of quotations that appear to reference real texts in order to reproduce a sense of an intellectual current of thought. Yet the textual interweaving of these with fabricated extracts deviates from the direction of a leading deliberation. Instead, the effect becomes that of an introspection that has blurred boundaries as to what is real or not. Will Navidson's navigating wish or will for asserting the real proves illusionary, while Johnny Truant's conscious absence and withdrawal from conventional living, which feeds his divagation, appears as the cause of a delusional perception of reality.

## 5.2. Peripatetic.

*'Stasis means ecstasy yet approaches the stillness of death'*<sup>4</sup>

The survival of the figure of the traveler in postmodern fiction may appear perplexing in an age where technological development has left very little ground unexplored. In the past, travelling enabled expansion and the discovery of what was new. Today, the perimeters of our world are completely mapped out and technological advance has allowed for a collapse of borders and boundaries, resulting in an often complex cultural mixing. Manuel Castells's trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* is largely concerned with the transformed conditions of the individual and society through their involvement in the (inter)net of the new communication media and the globalization resulting from the assimilation of traditions. Castells introduces the concepts of the 'space of places' (the operating place of an individual which constitutes his everyday reality) and 'space of flows' (the network society that materializes spontaneous and instant communication with different parts of the globe) to signal a significant change in the perception of 'space' that has cultural implications. As Jim McGuigan comments, for Castells '[a]nything can be downloaded any time, in principle, at the whim of the consumer. All culture is, in this way, eternally available, although at the same time it is curiously ephemeral.'<sup>5</sup> Castell's distinction between an operating and virtual space delineates their entanglement in the postmodern condition. The ease and immediacy in accessing information has altered the way history, culture and place are perceived today; while it allows for duration and a continuity of thought, it fosters a sporadic and episodic approach that incites a volatile and transitory communication of

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 52, my italics.

<sup>5</sup> Jim McGuigan, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 114.

traditions. Today, the individual has access to and can affect economical, social and cultural conditions around the world, while residing in one place. The circulation of images and information in a cybernet culture does not require a literal but only a virtual form of travelling. The ease with which one can access a plethora of information, both historical and momentary, and the simplicity with which an affluence of exchanges takes place, brings what was once thought of as distant and exotic in front of our computer screens. This demystifies the undertaking and the progress of the literal journey. It only takes a click of a button or a touch on a touch-screen to immediately enter and explore a world that was previously unknown.

This electronic navigating transforms us into *para*-tourists, travelers that set off for new places without ever leaving home, in fleeting and often epidermic instances. The *para* of *para*-tourism denotes both a parallel movement and an (often askew) extension of that process.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, *para*-touristic travelling is essentially paratactic rather than progressive, the collation of reflections standing alongside in a virtual sphere. At the same time, such parataxis is essential for the juxtaposition and interconnection of different cultural networks in the postmodern condition.<sup>7</sup> It is thus significant and perhaps surprising that a physical, rather than an electronic or *para*-touristic, traveler still survives in postmodern literature. While postmodern fiction appears to overturn so many other literary conventions

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<sup>6</sup> “‘Para’ as a prefix in English (sometimes ‘par’) indicates alongside, near or beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isometric or polymeric to. In borrowed Greek compounds ‘para’ indicates beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavourably, and among.” J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host”, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), 219.

<sup>7</sup> “‘Para’ is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in ‘para’, moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them. It also forms an ambiguous transition between one and the other.” J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host”, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 219. See also “Chapter 4: Transgression and Postmodern Fiction”.

and while the technological advance of the postmodern condition allows for more experimentation with the concept of travel, the figure of the traveler, however transformed by the effects of our age, appears to persevere in the postmodern novel.

The drifter of postmodern fiction is exposed in a plethora of already established directions. On a first look, Brad Listi's *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* is a text about a typical voyage of self-exploration articulated through the figure of a contemporary traveler. Wayne's journey appears to be that of self-discovery, but his travelling destinations appear random, unplanned and even nonsensical in conforming to stereotypical courses of 'soul-searching', ensuing the questioning of the concept of discovery. Wayne returns to San Francisco to attend to the funeral of his ex-girlfriend who has committed suicide. At the funeral, he learns that Amanda fell pregnant with his child and had an abortion. Wayne returns to his hometown but soon decides to head to Cancun. From Mexico, he goes to Cuba and then returns to his parent's home, only to set off to Louisiana, to pick up Uncle Brian, who suffers from a condition that resembles Down syndrome. On their journey back home, Wayne and his uncle stop to visit the Marengo Caves in Indiana, but while in the caves Uncle Brian has an attack which necessitates the assistance of paramedics. This incident instigates Wayne's search of a trajectory on the Appalachian Trail, which ends in New York. From there, he travels to Los Angeles to attempt to promote his screenplay *The Grandeur of Delusions*, but he is unsuccessful and when Lynch, a close friend, invites him to cover the Burning Man Festival for the magazine *The Bomb*, he promptly accepts. The festival is set in the middle of the Black Rock Desert, Nevada, where at least fifty thousand people concentrate once a year and construct an ephemeral small town complete with name streets, a variety of functions, music and events. Wayne's last stop and the culmination of his traveling experiences is the celebration of the burning of a high wooden structure in the shape of man, which signifies the end of the festival. Throughout the story, Wayne's frequent references to books he has read,

films he has seen and other information he has retrieved, appear as an attempt to reproduce a sense of revelation. But as Wayne remains depressingly aware of this conceit, it becomes clear that Listi's novel is not just a typical travel story. The insistence on a search of a trajectory and the often cynical approach that adds to demystifying the journey's expositions are characteristic of a postmodern anxiety in regards to origin and direction. Wayne's memoir of his travels is indicative of a postmodern questioning of the concepts of authenticity, destination and discovery.

Biographical accounts or memoirs, such as *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, are often affiliated to travel writing. Hartman's *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* is an autobiographical tracing of Hartman's personal intellectual progress and a revisiting of his theoretical development. Hence, Hartman begins his book by questioning the marketing promotion of a previous publication, *A Critic's Journey*, which is a collection of essays, under the classification of 'Travel'.<sup>8</sup> Understandably, Hartman finds this allocation of his collection unusual and proceeds with a warning: 'Trajectory, itinerary, journey. These are attractive and deceptive metaphors. They suggest a chosen or predetermined path, with a distinctive goal and course corrections. This is bound to lead to ego fiction.'<sup>9</sup> Yet, Hartman's depiction of his progress in literary criticism is not concentrated on personal information and deflects autobiographical facts. This elusion is not only interesting given Hartman's adventurous life journey, but it also echoes *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*'s relation of Wayne's personal journey to the postmodern condition. In both texts, personal or biographical information is not presented as an established or inflexible term that predetermines an individual's course, but as an irresolute element that is still at play within the progress of an ongoing journey. The biographical

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<sup>8</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1.



details of Hartman's evacuation from Frankfurt, Germany as a child, his teenage life in a communal home for refugees in a small English village near Oxford, his struggle to obtain a visa and be finally reunited with his mother in New York, his determination to continue his education with evening classes in Hunter College in Manhattan while working part-time at Gimbel's department store and his graduation from Queens College (CUNY) which gained him entry at Yale in 1949, are not the axis of *A Scholar's Tale*, but only supplement and inform the thought processes that lead him to the literary concerns he investigates in his critical career.

Hartman's criticism is characterized by shifts and turns proposed by his own revisions and re-evaluations of his theory. Critical approaches to his work have illuminated two main and corresponding stylistic challenges that complicate interventions to his theoretical contribution: Hartman resists dialectic oppositions, making it difficult to differentiate from his writings, and at the same time, he is constantly revisiting, reassessing and re-inventing his work, making it particularly challenging to identify his theoretical movements. As Douglas Atkins suggests, in *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style*, Hartman's spirit 'wanders (and wonders), free' while the reader can only speculate about the destination of Hartman's critical course.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, this variation of his interpretative approach that has led to a minimal treatment of Hartman's critical thought, as I discussed in the Introduction. While some responses to Hartman seek a sterile contextualisation and categorisation of his theory, other commentary pays specific tribute to Hartman's resistance to classification. Pieter Vermeulen observes, perhaps unfairly, that Hartman's own resignation from fostering his critical advances and his 'characteristic lack of self-promotion' resulted in his theory being approached today 'with a pious reverence that precludes a more

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas G. Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style* (London: Routledge, 1990), 5.

critical engagement with his work.<sup>11</sup> Similar approbations are also informed by Hartman's interpretative style, which signifies not only a profound engagement with the text but also an extensive knowledge of theoretical, literary and cultural aspects that Hartman elaborately interweaves in his commentary. Atkins seeks to adapt Hartman's style when he compares him to a bee that 'ranges widely over texts and theories and broods all over them' in order to 'engage in responsive dialogue' with the text and produce 'a kind of criticism that becomes difficult to *distinguish* from the text being responded to.'<sup>12</sup> In a similar way, any response to Hartman reflects the challenge of *distinguishing* itself from Hartman.

In following the call of the text, Hartman's interpretation appears itinerant. In *Saving the Text*, Hartman addresses the issue of his stylistic lack of sharpness or point, characterising his thinking process as *peripatetic*.<sup>13</sup> The term refers to the literal act of walking but the prefix *peri* suggests both a movement around and within the perimeters of an area, the mapping of a region *and* an engrossment, the intellectual residing or thinking about a *topos*. The *peripatetic* pertains to Aristotle, who was said to teach philosophy while walking about in the Lyceum of Athens, a tale that came to define his philosophical approach and denote it as digressive, discursive and traversing. Hartman is perhaps inspired by Aristotelian philosophy when in a familiar fashion he adopts the word *peripatetic* metaphorically to describe his mode of literary advance. But while Aristotle's philosophy endeavours to attain the definitive grounds of things, Hartman's approach refuses the gravity of establishing an appropriated position. Aristotle's basis of experience and existence is the inquiry and scientific determination of the actuality of things, from which steps can be made towards

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<sup>11</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism after the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2010), 2. Vermeulen identifies a crucial aspect in critical responses to Hartman when he addresses some devoted and devout engagements with his theoretical contribution. Yet, it is problematic to imply that such responses are precarious or that Hartman is responsible for the manner in which his work is received. Vermeulen's critique may be characteristic of the effects of postmodernism: in an age that thrives in the exaltation of the individual, Hartman's lack of self-promotion appears suspect or even, intentional.

<sup>12</sup> Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 64.

knowledge and the acquisition of truth. Hartman's phenomenology explores the experience of things and his *peripatetic* orientation does not become directed to the premise of principle truths. Unlike Aristotelian analyses that seek the establishment of conclusions, Hartman's questioning does not point to a particular destination. Hartman re-shuffles the components that condition his responses, to present a critical approach that enacts a journey: 'For Hartman, the Wandering Jew, there is no rest, only more travel, more travail, more work (of reading and writing) to be done.'<sup>14</sup>

The intertextual and paratextual elements of *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* reflect the reworking and revisiting of established information and tradition. Wayne's visit to Havana is accompanied by a visit to Ernest Hemingway's house, where he has the opportunity to meet the man that inspired the Old Man in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Wayne is hoping that the Old Man will '[t]ell [him] the wisdom of ages' only to realize that he was '[p]art of the tour'.<sup>15</sup> Such events of demythifications occur often in the story but it is the overall experimentation and variation of style that results in the sense of deflation and demystification which permeates *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* Initially, the text appears to comply with a narrative style that adapts accordingly in order to resonate the depicted environment: while Wayne is close to nature, the narration becomes more confessional and Wayne's inward look becomes expressed through the form of letters or diary entries; while he is in the city, the style appears to adapt to the rhythms of city-life, offering short and quick exchanges in the form of dialogue or smaller paragraphs. Yet, it is these stylistic fluctuations and shifts that *ADD* up in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* In overlaying and exploring a variety of literary styles, Listi's novel revisits traditional modes of narration to experiment with new ones and it is this undertaking that makes the novel a particularly difficult one to determine

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<sup>14</sup> Atkins, *Geoffrey Hartman: Criticism as Answerable Style*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Brad Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* (Great Britain: Friday Fiction, 2007), 93, 95.

and categorize. *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* could be generally classified as a travel novel because of its concern with the theme of travel, but that category becomes perhaps even more appropriate and relevant when considering that Listi appears to travel through different modes and styles of writing.

The text's experimentation with style is evident even from its title, which is presented in a manner that suggests an acronym, a code composed by the initials of the words 'attention', 'deficit' and 'disorder' (A.D.D.). Indeed, in his exploration of a variety of stylistic influences, Listi periodically includes letters, demonstrating a preoccupation with the genre of letter writing that corresponds with the epistolary novel. After his expedition on the Appalachian Trail, Wayne arrives in Hot Springs, North Carolina and decides to write to his parents. In his letter, Wayne describes his nomadic progression through the trail, his new-found appreciation of nature, his life outdoors, and a curious meeting with a clairvoyant, Katrina, who read his palm noting that his life line is lengthy, predicting a long life journey. Wayne signs this letter as '[y]our peripatetic son' yet the reference indicates not only his journey on the Appalachian Trail but also his life journey, which progresses through the culmination of physical and intellectual advances.<sup>16</sup> Wayne's *peripatetic* journey is thus represented as both an intellectual and topographical orientation at one and the same time. 'Hiking was good for the imagination.'<sup>17</sup> It is, after all, while walking in the country that Wayne conceives the scheme for an accidental comedy. Yet, the construction of his story does not appear to correspond with Wayne's topographical progression: 'The plotline for *The Grandeur of Delusions* came to me during a farmer's blow. Mucus sailed from my nose into the Appalachian wilderness. And a story was born.'<sup>18</sup> The instant and accidental moment of

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<sup>16</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 118. 'I was talking to myself a mile a minute. I was thinking about what I was thinking about. I was trying to have an experience. I was looking for wisdom with little success.' Ibid. 177, my italics.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 185.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 186.

inspiration becomes related to the release of mucus and bodily fluids. As the body becomes unblocked and able to be oxygenated and reinvigorated, the letter or word begins to flow and Wayne's story streams.

The description of Wayne's conception of his story may be accidental but it can still be considered as an affirmation of the creative self as the artistic force, proposing the artist as the source of creativity and even warning against the distractions of external influences, particularly in the face of the impact of an excess of information in the postmodern condition. Indeed, the moment of genesis of Wayne's story becomes associated with a spell of purification both physical (the internal unblocking of a bodily circulation) and mental (as a catharsis from the peripheral distractions of social living). This presents the question of whether Listi's 'story within the story' implies a wish for purification, projecting the postmodern text as exhibiting the artist's struggle to disengage with the postmodern condition and revealing the roots of the postmodern novel in the bottom of a pool of sacramental waters for the catharsis of the literary text. In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. Wayne's accidental comedy is diaphonic, since he defines his composition as a story that despite being serious may also be perceived as humorous, precisely because of its sombre intentions. The comical effect of the story derives not from the text itself, but from the awareness of its misconception. The same may apply to Listi's novel: *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. resists an attending or establishing a specific locus, projecting in this way the inability of following conventional or traditional creative paths for the making of a novel within the postmodern condition. In that sense, the text responds to the struggle of the postmodern author in terms of establishing an origin and originality, and proceeding with the awareness that his creative product will not become a focal point.

Listi's authorial position within the postmodern condition becomes perhaps reflected in Wayne's struggle to promote the story he conceived on the Appalachian Trail. *The Grandeur*

*of Delusions* is a script that Wayne tries to promote as a big budget action movie when he visits Los Angeles. Upon his arrival there, Wayne describes his impressions of the city portraying it as a kind of a station or stop for a mixture of different people.

Los Angeles isn't a typical American city. It has no center. It has no monorail. It doesn't have much of a subway system. It doesn't stand at attention. Instead, it reclines across a desert, languid and chaotic, a tangle of highways beside the rippling sea. It cooks in perpetual sunlight, under a rapidly deteriorating ozone layer, and waits for people to arrive.

And people arrive.

**megalopolis** *n.*

- 1.) A very large city.
- 2.) A region made up of several large cities and their surrounding areas in sufficient proximity to be considered a single urban complex.<sup>19</sup>

Wayne depicts Los Angeles as a place that is not so much formulated or standardised by structural constructions but becomes defined by the people that arrive there. Los Angeles is not an original place but a space that regenerates and recycles aspirations. The definition that follows the description of Los Angeles signifies that it is both an actual location *and* a concept of a large arrangement or *topos*. For Wayne, this fluid and hybrid space appears ideal for the circulation of his script. However, his story is not favoured by the production company he approaches. The transcriptions of Wayne's script in the text communicate that his accidental comedy may only be thought of as comical because it is so badly written. Yet Wayne's intentionally poor literary performance and his script's heterogenous nature are not appreciated by Baxter, the producer Wayne approaches. Baxter tells Wayne that his company

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<sup>19</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 245.

is looking to expand its genres: 'We want to parlay what we've done into a whole new realm. You can't stay static in this business. Stasis is death.'<sup>20</sup> Baxter seeks for expansion and progression and yet fails to see how Wayne's script transgresses comedy. Indeed, Wayne's story appears static, with poor dialogues and dry language, but it also demands imagination, an interpretation that is informative and enriching, to add to his artistic vision. Baxter's role as the producer presupposes that his reading of Wayne's script can add to it and yet Baxter's response proves to be not productive at all and, ironically, rather static. The depiction of Baxter's role as producer in the story resembles Wayne's description of Los Angeles: even when the magnitude of their position is determined, the lack of imagination subdues the progress and continuation of the artistic vision.

The idea of stasis as (de)termination permeates *Attention.Deficit.Disorder* from the very start. When Wayne contemplates the manner in which Amanda committed suicide, he detects a certain determination on Amanda's behalf. Amanda died breathing in the fumes of her car, an act that must have taken a considerable amount of time, which nevertheless did not sway her from her decision to end her life. There is an obvious irony in the image of Amanda's physical and mental stillness, while she sits in the inside of a transport vehicle. The gas exhausts purport a 'burned out' movement, an inherent futility of moving where there is nowhere to go. Wayne's contemplation of Amanda's death becomes echoed in banal thoughts: 'My feet were killing me. / The flowers were in bloom.'<sup>21</sup> And it is not only Wayne's 'treacherous' feet that are deadly here; the consolation of nature is deceitful, since the image of spring brings to Wayne's memory the death of his unborn child, along with

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<sup>20</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 253.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 245.

Amanda.<sup>22</sup> Wayne attempts to find comfort in the fact that his unborn child's death was painless, but the question remains of how life can bloom, without motion. The struggle between constant movement and the stillness of stasis imbues Wayne's journey in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*.

### 5.3. Definitions.

*'I had embarked on a para-Maimonidean quest for an imagination purged of anthropomorphic ideas.'*<sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, Wayne's journey progresses through both topographical and intellectual steps. Wayne's advance becomes reflected in the text's textual experimentation, with the insertion of dictionary definitions. Specific words interject the narrative to signify his intellectual steps, solidifying a sense of development in his *peripatetic*. Wayne's definitions infiltrate the text throughout his journey delineating, anchoring or distilling the meaning of the narrative that surrounds them. Other times, however, the dictionary entries appear random and fragment the narrative flow, as they expand on seemingly unrelated considerations of the (alternative) meanings of the inserted word. This section examines whether the lexicon insertions in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder* facilitate Wayne's intellectual successions by establishing sojourns in his thinking and narrative and promoting a better understanding of the text. Here, I will attempt to determine whether Listi's experimentation with the inserted

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<sup>22</sup> Vermeulen identifies Hartman's distinction between nature (the particular or creation) and Nature (*physis* or process) as the turning point for Hartman's revision of his theory of modern poetry, which he develops in *The Unmediated Vision*. Tracing Hartman's distinction between nature and Nature to Heidegger's difference between beings and Being, Vermeulen suggests that for Hartman, Wordsworth's achievement, which becomes the focus of *Wordsworth's Poetry*, is that it is 'nature that leads [him] beyond nature.' Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 14.



terminological references allows or opposes continuity, distracting our reading and fragmenting the narrative with entries of the word's polysemy.

Considering the dictionary definitions in the text as significations and mediations of Wayne's intellectual movements suggests, on the one hand, his narrative's inability to communicate and represent the experience of his travels sufficiently and, on the other, a loss of meaning in regards to his narration that can only be restored with the addition of these lexicon references. In both respects, the experimentation with these applications of words in the text in such an isolated and economical fashion implies language's failure to represent and the artist's ongoing struggle to assert meaning within the postmodern condition. Wayne's references to definitions during the progress of his journey recreate a distance that is both spatial and conceptual, and which reflects the need to delineate mediatory influences and deal with the indeterminacy that characterizes the postmodern. But if these definitions appear as an act of atonement in attempting to reconstruct meaning or restore the relation of language to meaning, they are also dialogically related to the narrative of the text and in identifying the many attributes of a word they continue that dialogic, revealing and generating new readings for the narrative that surrounds them. The mediative role of language is of course a problematic not exclusive to the postmodern narrative. In *A Scholar's Tale*, Hartman recalls the venture of his first publication, *The Unmediated Vision* and his attempt to compose a theory of modern poetry. He describes how his work there concluded with the suggestion that 'poetry's symbolic process undoes the specificity of experience undergone in order to gain a "pure representation" or "imageless vision."' (What would be left at the end of this *via*

*negativa*, I later wondered.)<sup>24</sup> Hartman's quest in *The Unmediated Vision* was mediation but his later revisions address the narrow and exclusionary nature of that purified process.<sup>25</sup>

Hartman's reference to Maimonides noted at the start of this section comments on *The Unmediated Vision* and it identifies the systematic, rather than transcendent, nature of his critical approach in his work there. Maimonides's philosophical work on negative theology (*via negativa*) sought a methodological resolution of the conflict between religion and secularity by attempting to define what God is, by what he is not. Arthur Bradley explains negative theology as an approach to 'the divine not by positive or anthropomorphic language but by negative language, by paradoxical or contradictory language, or by insisting on the inadequacy of all language to describe His transcendence. In simple terms, then, negative theology is a theology that says what God is not rather than what He is'.<sup>26</sup> Bradley's description of negative theology already implies that its definition is more complex than his simplified summary. As Jacques Derrida suggests, the name of negative theology is not always illuminative of the complications and the multiplicity of the concept of apophatic theology. In his essay 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' Derrida comes to fulfil his promise to finally speak about negative theology but he is clear in declaring that his discourse is only propositional and that he finds that the name of negative theology can sometimes lead to simplistic interpretations. Derrida argues that the inadequacy of language to approach the

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<sup>24</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Vermeulen suggests that in *The Unmediated Vision*, mediation 'points to the possibility of restoring a sense of orientation and direction in a post-metaphysical world – that is, *after* the metaphysics of presence.' According to Vermeulen, Hartman's later work 'defines modernity no longer by a lack of mediation [...] but rather by "the curse of mediacy" – the idea that an unmediated vision is impossible.' Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 48, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 12. Bradley also notes that Derrida suggests that 'any definition of negative theology can at best be a *via negativa* of the *via negativa* – a statement of what it *is not* – because negative theology is definitively suspicious of every concept of received identity including its own.' Ibid. 22.

name of God, may lead to drawing analogies between negative theology and a ‘rhetoric of negative determination, endlessly multiplying the defenses and the apophatic warnings’.<sup>27</sup>

The danger is to be perpetually directed from one definition to another. Essential to this is the question that Toby Foshay notes, of ‘[h]ow to speak of a transgressive negative theology otherwise than in the language that negative theology was itself dedicated to exceeding?’<sup>28</sup> Negative theology argues that it is impossible to exceed language by the medium of language. The inadequacy of language is this impossibility of mediation. From this it is then understandable why Hartman describes his approach in *The Unmediated Vision* as para-Maimonidean. Hartman’s early work moves parallel to Maimonides’s idea of negative theology, in that it approaches poetry’s economy of language as the result of unmediation. Hartman’s attempt to define the pure process of mediation led him to some significant revisions. It is perhaps typical that Hartman does not shy away from the problematic task of determining pure representation. The realization of what that definition

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, *Derrida and Negative Theology: With a conclusion by Jacques Derrida*. Eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 74. At the same time, Derrida denies deconstruction and *différance* as a form of apophatic theology and declares: ‘No, what I write is not “negative theology”’ refusing to consider the relation of negative theology and deconstruction as analogic. Ibid. 77

It should also be noted that the translation of the title of Derrida’s essay presents some difficulties. The rendering of the original ‘Comment Ne Pas Parler: Dénégations’ from *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987, 535-595) as ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ appears reductive. As Mark Taylor explains, ‘[t]o de-negate is to un-negate. Un-negation is itself a form of negation. More precisely, denegation is an un-negation that affirms rather than negates negation. The affirmation of negation by way of denegation subverts the dialectical affirmation of negation by way of the negation of negation. To think or rethink negative theology with Derrida, it is necessary to think the negative undialectically by thinking a negative that is neither both negation and affirmation nor either negation or affirmation. This strange thought or unthought is the neither/nor implied in dénéga-tion. All things considered, it is better to leave the untranslatable untranslated.’ Mark Taylor, “Non- Negative Negative Atheology” *Diacritics*, 20.4 (1990):2-16, (3, n. 4).

<sup>28</sup> Toby Foshay, ‘Introduction: Denegation and Resentment’, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 5.

excluded (namely, the real) and the reworking of his original position indicates the stages of his intellectual progression.<sup>29</sup>

While the initial quest for Hartman was the consideration of the proper name of mediation, his later work corresponds with Derrida's announcement in his essay 'Des Tours de Babel' that 'understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names.'<sup>30</sup> For both Derrida and Hartman the concern appears to be that of the gap between naming and meaning. In 'Words and Wounds' Hartman address this issue and draws on Saussure to indicate that,

[w]hereas ordinary nouns, *table* and *chair*, not only point to a referent in the world of things but rely on a concept of table and chair in order to signify, names seem to be pure signifiers that have only a referent (the indicated person or place) but no concept or signified. We cannot conceptualize names unless we make them into trade marks (like Kodak) or type names (like calling a woman a Griselda).<sup>31</sup>

While the trade mark name signifies a function, service or product and invites its public recognition, the type name appears more complex and exclusive, since what it refers to issues from a more localized, topical and temporal common understanding. The type name presupposes a cultural understanding within the community it springs from and as such it can also be encountered as a code to be deciphered by an 'outsider'. But this restrictive function

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<sup>29</sup> In a response to Paul Fry, Hartman suggests that Fry's work is 'not only a redefining of Wordsworth's poetry but also clearing the way toward a better definition of the place or function of poetry in general. Neither mysticism nor nihilism play a part in this but rather what my colleague once characterized as an "a-theologic astonishment" (1995: 7).' Hartman continues by arguing that '[t]his negative ("a-theologic") move is directed at more than a speak-easy type of religious or transcendental appropriation of a literary medium that remains enigmatic in its anthropological function. Yet precisely because we long for something more positive and bracing, something to rescue poetry, and the aesthetic dimension in general, from Limbo, it is risky to define a great poet by a seeming understatement, the "poetry of what we are."' Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Paul Fry's Wordsworth, and the Meaning of Poetic Meaning, or Is It on-Meaning? Letter to a Colleague and Friend", *Partial Answers*, 8.1 (2010): 1-22, (2).

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 105.

<sup>31</sup> Hartman, *Saving the Text*, 126.

of the type name also points to the inclusivity of sharing it or its understanding. As an *other* name, the type name does not reject what it names but has a parallel existence to it. In that sense, the type name is mediative rather than determinative, and it continues to exist and expand through the individuals or names it typifies.<sup>32</sup>

A type name appears in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. when Wayne's name changes as he sets off to the Appalachian Trail. He explains that a tradition required him to adopt a 'trail name' given to hikers that decided to take on the journey and that the name 'was a symbolic gesture representative of a man's desire to transform himself from what he was into what he wished to be.'<sup>33</sup> The procedure of the traditional naming dictates that the 'trail name' is given to the hiker. Wayne agrees to this second baptism and asks his friend A.B. and Jenny to give him a new name. Wayne's compliance to this traditional naming suggests, as Hartman writes in 'Words and Wounds', that

those who have a name may also seek a more authentic and defining one.

The *other* name is usually kept secret precisely because it is sacred to the individual, or numinous (*nomen numen*): as if the concentrated soul of the person lodged in it. A perilous or taboo relation may arise between the given (baptismal) name and the truly "proper" name, and then a psychic search unfolds for this hidden word under all words, this spectral name. It is a quest that often leads to the adoption of pseudonymous and nicknames, and even to anonymity.<sup>34</sup>

Wayne's *other* name is Wolfgang and it is indeed a secret or at least remains undetected by anyone else apart from Jenny and A.B. Translated from German, the name Wolfgang denotes

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<sup>32</sup> In regard to the problem of defining the postmodern, a consideration of the name of 'postmodernism' as a type name might be useful at this point: the name of the 'postmodern' should not be thought of as a trademark but, in Hartman's sense, as a type name that simultaneously accommodates and suspends, expanding through and progressing from the artistic form it outlines and typifies.

<sup>33</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 152.

<sup>34</sup> Hartman, *Saving the Text*, 125.

a travelling wolf, the path or the way of the wolf. In that sense, Wayne's new name reflects his journey on the Appalachian Trail. Still, we must consider that the wolf is a very social animal that usually functions within a pack. To think of Wayne as *Wolfgang* is to acknowledge his isolation from the places and people he knows, in the course of his journey.<sup>35</sup> Wayne's given (wolf)name signifies, then, not only his travel but also the struggle of situating the self within or without the social.<sup>36</sup> In the postmodern world Wayne Fencer's deficit is his name Wolfgang Fencer.

In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, the struggle of relating and dealing with the social and the realities of postmodern life becomes reflected not only in Wayne's resolution to travel alone, or even in his sympathetic recognition of Amanda's reason for suicide, but also in the title of the novel which suggests a psychosomatic unrest.<sup>37</sup> A.D.D. or A.D.H.D is a neurobehavioral disorder that is characterized by the inability to cope and process information, lack of focus and impulsive constant movement.<sup>38</sup> Listi's title for his novel then, enacts a diagnosis of Wayne's condition. In this way, Wayne's struggle to identify and associate himself with the world and his own thoughts features as a malady. Furthermore, the

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<sup>35</sup> This isolation issues before Wayne begins his travels. The novel begins with Wayne looking outside a window, observing people as they pass by and wondering how he connects with them and how the people that cross your life alter or affect your personal story: 'People were walking along the sidewalks, wrapped in hats and scarves. I wondered who they are, where they were going, what they did. I wondered about what their stories were. I wondered what would happen to them. I watched them disappearing, one by one and two by two, lost in the direction of wherever it was that they were headed. And none of them even knew I was there.' Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> In *A Scholar's Tale* Hartman writes that the 'tense relation of local to global, so conspicuous at the present time, has been surfacing since an ethos of "local attachment" arose in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The emphasis on spirit of place was not entirely retro and sentimental but contained as instinctive reaction to a growing cosmopolitan trend.' Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 65.

In regard to the idea of the sole wolf, also see Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927). The protagonist's struggle in Hesse's novel is that between the conflict of solipsism (represented in the text by Harry) and social life (Maria), which becomes played out in the Magic Theatre, where the limits between the real and the imaginary become dissolved.

<sup>37</sup> 'Suicide renders you stupid and afraid. Stupid because you'll never know exactly why they did it. Afraid because you're not 100 percent convinced it was illogical.' Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, 164.

<sup>38</sup> The 'H' in A.D.H.D. stands for 'hyperactivity'. The absence of *Hyperactivity* from the acronym of the title of the novel may be emphatic of the *attentional* problems of the condition, rather than the restlessness, spasms and the state of being excessively or pathologically active. AD(H)D could then be implicit of an intellectual overactivity, relating more to the difficulty of maintaining focus (or *High Definition*), than the management of the body. This could suggest that the *Attention Deficit Hinders Delineation*.

association of Wayne's state with A.D.D. may also be approached as an attempt to characterize the postmodern condition: in the postmodern everything appears simultaneously stimulating and indifferent, attracting and deflecting attention, as with Wayne's narrative fluctuations. A.D.D. may be, then, an etiology of the postmodern condition. But if the postmodern is to be approached as a defect or malady, then the insertion of definitions in the text may correspond to the identification of the symptoms of the postmodern 'syndrom': the lexicon entries and definitions of 'trajectory', 'onset', 'terminal velocity', 'reaction', 'pain', 'Alzheimer's disease', 'myocardial infarction', 'yourself', 'ecstasy' and even 'bullshit', to name a few, could be read in this case as identifying manifestations of the postmodern condition.<sup>39</sup> The analysis of the words in the dictionary entries, however, becomes demonstrative of the failure to focus and determine a precise understanding: the words about words disperse meaning, leading to further displacement and an impasse. In this way, the words become the wound and, as Hartman notes in the conclusion of his essay 'Words and Wounds', when the 'literary or aesthetic effect proper' is 'present we "shudder" for the same reason as when we are wounded through the ear. Words have been found that close the path to the original words. This absolute closure is what we respond to, this appearance of definitive attachment and substitution. The words themselves block the way.'<sup>40</sup> All that the writer can do in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. when along the journey, experiences become crystallized in language, is become a collector of words.<sup>41</sup>

The assemblage of words in the text takes the form of lists, not only in the cataloguing of the various meaning of words with the appearance of definitions, but also with the interjection of tabulated information, retrieved to explicate and enumerate evidence, statistics,

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<sup>39</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. 135, 329, 62, 281, 326, 107, 107, 305, 334, 255 respectively.

<sup>40</sup> Hartman, *Saving the Text*, 157.

<sup>41</sup> See also Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" for a discussion of *bricolage* and the *bricoleur*. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978).

historical facts and other data. One such interjection of a list follows Wayne's narration about reading Siddhartha Gautama. Wayne draws on the part of Siddhartha's life when he becomes restless and relays:

One night, against the wishes of his father, Siddhartha snuck out of the palace and wandered into the streets. Here is what he saw:

- 1.) A sick man
- 2.) A poor man
- 3.) A beggar
- 4.) A corpse.

Shortly thereafter, Siddhartha freaked out essentially. He abandoned his former way of life and dedicated himself to solving the riddle of suffering endemic in all human beings. He even abandoned his wife and family. Naked and alone, he set out into the countryside in search of true enlightenment. He became a wandering ascetic.<sup>42</sup>

Wayne's narration proceeds with a systematization of Siddhartha's philosophy after his 'enlightenment' and the realization that the way to happiness is a life of balance:

In the midst of this epiphanic trance, Siddhartha managed to reduce human existence to Four Noble Truths. Those Four Noble Truths are:

- 1.) All humans suffer.
- 2.) All human suffering is caused by human desire, particularly the desire that impermanent things be permanent.
- 3.) Human suffering can be ended by ending human desire.
- 4.) Desire can be ended by following the "Eightfold Noble Path": right understanding, right thought, right speech, right

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<sup>42</sup> Listi, *Attention Deficit Disorder*, 45-46.



action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Siddhartha went on to spend the rest of his life teaching the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path to anyone who would listen. He died at the age of eighty. His devotees generally believe that he passed into the state of nirvana at the moment of his death.

**nirvana** *n.*

1.) *Often cap:*

a. *Buddhism:* The ineffable ultimate in which one has attained disinterested wisdom and compassion.

b. *Hinduism:* Emancipation from ignorance and the extinction of all attachment.

2.) An ideal condition of rest, harmony, stability, or joy.

These days, Siddhartha is commonly referred to by his nickname:

Buddha.<sup>43</sup>

Wayne's oversimplification and reductive report of Siddhartha's philosophy and life appears almost journalistic. In its simplicity, and in assuming the reader's ignorance about the figure of Siddhartha, the description seems almost defensive of Wayne's intellectuality and engagement with philosophical affairs. In a world that thrives on a materialistic and factual approach of life, Wayne seems here to adapt and accord to the norm of the postmodern condition in order to mediate his philosophical concerns.<sup>44</sup> This becomes achieved with a formulaic and methodological approach that is systematic rather than exegetical. Still, the playfulness with form allows for a more imaginative approach. The points of the first list of the things that Siddhartha sees appear to correspond with the second list of the Four Noble

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<sup>43</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 46-47.

<sup>44</sup> 'To speak or write the truth ceases to have much meaning or public resonance when speakers lose their connection to the words in question'. Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 139.

Truths: the sick man represents the idea that all humans suffer, the poor man pairs with the understanding that ‘human suffering is caused by human desire’ and so on. The reader is thus invited to fill in the interpretative hiatus between these concepts. Wolfgang Iser proposes in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* that readers should fill in the gaps in the narrative text. In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, Listi invites the imagination of the reader by setting the grounds for our intellectual journey, acknowledging the impossibility of controlling or regulating the direction of our thoughts. *Listi’s lists* explore the indeterminacy of language by displaying and mapping out an imaginative ground that the reader can choose to explore or not. What we are aware of from the onset of this literary journey is that it cannot end with the revelation of fixed determinations. ‘Art exhibits human freedom even when it discloses human unfreedom.’<sup>45</sup>

#### 5.4. Revelations: About Deferring Declamations.

*‘I have too little nostalgia in me, too little anxiety about a certain kind of life  
passing away.’<sup>46</sup>*

Memoirs and autobiographies engage with the question of how do we define the meaning of our lives and, for that purpose, they record and account the instances that emerge as significant in someone’s life. Such narratives usually aim to retrieve moments that are valuable in keeping with the projection of a particular destination in the composition of someone’s story. Something similar occurs with the definition of the postmodern novel in contemporary critical writings: the postmodern critic looks in the past to retrieve the significant moments in modern thought that become projected in postmodernism either to

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<sup>45</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>46</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale*, 23.

reinvigorate modern concerns (e.g. Habermas) or to contrast a complete shift (e.g. Lyotard) and thus respond to the question of what the literary future holds. The central issue that underlines both of these approaches is what the revelation of the postmodern is. This section will examine the revelatory in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* and in postmodern literature: what has the postmodern text revealed, how has it informed critical thought and where is it that postmodern writing takes us?

The issue of what postmodernism reveals appears more pressing, in view of various critical commentaries that celebrate the death of the postmodern and the emergence of an *after* or *post*-postmodernism.<sup>47</sup> Since Alex Callinico's recent and famous proclamation that postmodernism is now history, the concern about the reckoning and aftermath of the postmodern has become central in literary thought. Seeking the outcomes of postmodernism suggests not only an apocalyptic moment that signifies the end of the postmodern era but also a search for a trajectory and an attempt to map out a progressive movement of a break, from a break. Such historical approaches to postmodern fiction may be reductive, however. As Jeremy Green writes in *Late Postmodernism*,

obituaries for postmodernism are attempts to refuse or dismiss one or another aspect of problems – of culture, period, and style – to which the word, however vaguely and portentously, gestures. It seems more useful to retain the allusiveness of the term, while registering its *aging*, to recognize, in other words, postmodernisms, distinctions of mode and moment within “full postmodernity.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Among others, see Alan Kirby's article “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond” in *Philosophy Now* ([http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The\\_Death\\_of\\_Postmodernism\\_And\\_Beyond](http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond)) and Timotheus Vermeulen's and Robin van den Akker's “Notes on Metamodernism” in the *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, Vol. 2, 2010 (<http://aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677/6304>).

<sup>48</sup> Green, *Late Postmodernism*, 20.

Green proposes an exploration of postmodernity and an engagement with tracking the many paths it reveals, rather than advocating detachment from the challenges the postmodern presents. Today, postmodernism remains questioned and, at the same time, it continues to pose a question about literature and its future: it is, in effect, the spot of a question mark, rather than the full stop of a period; the mark or *topos* of an interrogation that points to the unnamed, unknown and uncharted, or, in other words, to that which is to come. Postmodernism's movement appears to be always already a departure, a stand before a moment of revelation, apocalypse and the promised future.

In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, the periods that connect the title of the novel occupy a gap between the words and link them to suggest a continuing progress.<sup>49</sup> 'Too much *attention* to one thing may indicate a perceptual *deficit* that can cause an assimilating *disorder*' is one way of reading the title, linking it to the symptoms of postmodern condition and the effects of a plethora of information on the individual. Still, this interpretation is descriptive of an affect and is explanatory, rather than exegetical or revelatory. An apocalyptic reading of the novel would seek to identify instances of surprise that follow the revelation of what was previously unknown. Yet, despite Wayne's extensive travels, the surprising thing is that in the text Wayne appears to have very little to be surprised about in his long expeditions. His travels seem to constantly defer a sense of revelation but Wayne does not appear disappointed by the lack of personal revelation in his travels. His willingness to submit himself in expeditions that appear already known and exhausted becomes rooted in a quest to experience these particular paths, rather than assume a *para-touristic* vista. In that sense, Wayne's travels are not a nostalgic revisiting of the path already known, but a submission to the process of the walk and peripatetic thought. In that way, Wayne's expeditions become representative of the

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<sup>49</sup> This sense of continuation may also be suggested through the ellipses that the three dots formulate (...), if we were to ignore the words of the text's title.

experience of the postmodern condition: it is not that the traveler (or artist) struggles with the representation of the self; it is that *everything* can be accommodating and representative of the postmodern identity. It is the acknowledgement of this potentiality of *non*-revelation that permeates Listi's novel.

In the text, the diffused notion of revelation has an effect on the representation of death and endings. This becomes particularly evident in Wayne's narrations about suicide, which appear to struggle with the idea that a conscious and intended final conclusion is possible. In an attempt to understand suicide and its causes better, Wayne researches the issue and offers his results in chapter 5. Starting with the definition of suicide, Wayne offers a list of historical facts from Ancient Greece, recent statistics about suicide rates in different countries and other information about mass suicide. Wayne concludes on the social reception and reactions to Wataru Tsurumi's bestseller *The Complete Suicide Manual*, a help guide for people considering suicide published in Japan in 1993, which offered an analysis and a matter-of-fact assessment of suicide methods. Tsurumi's book is an impersonal account that addresses suicide as a problem that requires practical management and assistance, and is promoted to cover a social demand. Wayne's narration appears equally aloof, offering a dissemination of general information about suicide. This 'passing on' of information does not answer the causes of suicide but it echoes the 'passing on' of suicidal death. In that way, death becomes a *topos* for examination, rather than an experience, a 'passing along' rather than the ceasing of existence. By approaching death with this mediative glance and as if the sharing information about death can compensate for the things the dead cannot tell us, the terminality of suicide and death is suspended. This demystification of suicide characterizes the person that attempts or succeeds in suicide as an explorer of *via*, a mediator that defers the (de)termination of death.

The aversion to the idea of death as a authentic final act can be interpreted as Wayne's denial or coping mechanism in regards to Amanda's death. Indeed, Amanda's death underscores every turn of Wayne's travels. Wayne portrays her suicide as the result of an inflexibility and an inability to adapt. Amanda is remembered as a strong personality with clear morals, a pleasant disposition and a conspicuous stance in life:

Amanda loved to travel, loved to be on the road. She was good at conversation. Good in silence. She never seemed to get tired. And she always insisted that we stop at mom-and-pop restaurants along the way. It was a thing with her. No Franchises. No superstores. Nothing familiar. Everything had to be local. All commercial transactions, save gasoline, had to be conducted in a noncorporate environment. Truck-stop diners. Greasy spoons. Local motels. She felt it made the travel experience more authentic.

*I always liked that about her.*<sup>50</sup>

Amanda's quest for an authentic experience 'haunts' the text and the manifestations of this are suggestive of what Hartman calls 'the struggle of the individual against inauthenticity', a struggle that 'leads to a distinct increase in autobiographical reflection. A memoir [...] strives for transparency. It presumes a convergence, even coincidence, of first-person narrator and the self being portrayed.'<sup>51</sup> In the text, Amanda's quest for authenticity is echoed in the transparent or dry language of Wayne's travel's memoir, the deliberately unsophisticated and uncontrived writing style and the clinical approach of her suicide. Amanda's death signifies the enucleation of the authentic experience and thus, signals a mediative point of interval. In the postmodern condition of fluidity and influx, the authentic can only exist as a voiding and absence, a gap that is revealed as something inheritably known and yet, unplaced.

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<sup>50</sup> Brad Listi *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 115 (my italics).

<sup>51</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 9.

The unplaced place that confronts the artist in the struggle with inauthenticity is not an apocalyptic space but rather a space of interval. In his essay ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ Derrida draws on a Platonic example to explore the relationship between place and articulation, and develops the idea of the *khora*. Derrida suggests that while in the Platonic tradition the idea of the Good promotes the Good as transcendent (giving birth to what *is* without having a place), the idea of the *khora* expresses what is beyond (the other place). He writes:

If the *khora* – place, spacing, receptacle (*hypodokhe*) - is neither sensible nor intelligible, it seems to *participate* in the intelligible in an enigmatic way (51a). Since it “receives all”, it makes possible the formation of the cosmos. As it is neither this nor that (neither intelligible nor sensible) one may speak as *if* it were a joint participant in both. *Neither/nor* easily becomes *both...and*, both this and that.<sup>52</sup>

The *khora*, then, is not a place that reveals but a receptive space, a womb and a channel. As an ‘*hypodokhe*’, it is to be thought of as a welcoming gesture and a hospitable place of connection but also, as the Greek word suggests, as an outlet that facilitates correspondence.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the *khora* is not accommodating or mediating:

[I]t neither creates nor produces anything, not even an event insofar as it takes place. It gives no order and it makes no promise. It is radically ahistorical, because nothing happens through it and nothing happens to it. Plato insists on its necessary indifference; to receive all and allow itself to be marked or affected by what is inscribed in it, the *khora* must remain without form and without proper determination. But if it is amorphous

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<sup>52</sup>Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 104-5.

<sup>53</sup> *Khora* (χώρα) translates to ‘country’, ‘region’ or ‘territory’ but it also connotes to the *khoro* (χώρο) or room (as in *having* or *giving* room and not in the sense of ‘the room of a house’) and *khoros* (χώρος) the space that is not identifiable by what it contains.

(*amorphon*; *Timaeus*, 50d), this signifies neither lack nor privation. *Khora* is nothing positive or negative. It is impassive, but it is neither passive nor active.<sup>54</sup>

In *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*, the idea of the *khora* becomes suggested through Wayne's preoccupation with bridges as a popular suicidal place, which is initiated by the fact that Amanda's ashes are scattered on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the 'arguably [...] number-one suicide destination on the planet' where people go 'to cross over into the next dimension.'<sup>55</sup> Of course, bridges are not amorphous in structure but in lingering between earth and sky and in between the places they connect, they appear to be *neither* here *nor* there and at the same time, *both* here *and* there. Bridges, as with Derrida's idea of the *khora*, are 'marked' but remain undetermined in regards to where they belong. As such, their determination, inscription and ascription appears delusive. Furthermore, this conceptualization of bridges also relates to the representation of bridges as a burial place in the text. The Golden Gate Bridge takes another dimension when thought of vertically, as a space where the body of the faller becomes suspended between life and death. This vertical interval becomes represented in the text in typographical and temporal terms:

Approximately once every two weeks, somebody jumps off the Golden Gate  
Bridge.

*The*  
*free fall*  
*takes*

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<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 107. Following Derrida, Caputo describes *khora* as 'neither present nor absent, active or passive, the good nor evil, living nor nonliving - but rather atheological and nonhuman - khôra is not even a receptacle. Khôra has no meaning or essence, no identity to fall back upon. She/it receives all without becoming anything, which is why she/it can become the subject of neither a philosopheme nor mytheme. In short, the khôra is tout autre [fully other], very.' Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, eds. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida / Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 35-36.

<sup>55</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 12.



*about*  
*four*  
*seconds.*<sup>56</sup>

The temporal period of the fall is enacted in the reading of this section, which intervenes to offer a pause and a lacuna. On the space of the bridge (and of the text here) nothing happens but a passing. The bridge holds nothing other than a suspension; like the *khora*, it does not reveal a place but is the spacing of interval.

If, following Derrida's notion, the *khora* is neither life nor death, neither the past nor the future, then it cannot be revelatory or pointing to any one direction. Wayne's experience of a limbo that becomes associated with the postmodern condition echoes the sense of passing or interval that characterized Derrida's description of the *khora*: 'People came, people went. Life was a *transient* affair. This kind of thing happened all the time. People met. People parted. People smiled. People showered together. People never saw one another again. People made their own separate ways toward *The Void*. That was life. That was death. That was the way it went. You'd think I would've been more used to it by now.'<sup>57</sup> The destination of the journey is *The Void*, which is transitory and fleeting, playful and deferring, amorphous and interruptive, an opening and a gap that signifies life *and* death. Wayne's understanding of *The Void* is suggestive of the style and language of the text as well, since it defers fixed meaning by determinations and definitions. Yet, if in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* we can detect Wayne's subtle wish for stability or the struggle to come to terms with *The Void*, we could not recognize the same in Hartman's critical work. As we see in the epigraph at the start of this section, Hartman has 'little nostalgia' or anxiety 'about a certain kind of life passing away', and this becomes reflected in the difficulty of his unpointed style and in

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<sup>56</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 101, my italics.

identifying an origin and direction in his work. Hartman's critical contribution has often been approached as unrevealing and ambiguous; to borrow from Derrida's description of the *khora*, Hartman's criticism 'gives no order, and it makes no promise'. In resisting determination while at the same time allowing itself to be 'marked', in being receptive but without aiming to assume a particular position, Hartman's contribution appears to 'occupy' the critical region of *The Void* or *khora*, embracing and making room for language as *en passant*. In that sense, Hartman's peripatetic style offers the interval and distance needed to bridge the literary text and the reader.

Hartman's suspending style appears particularly required in the face of the challenge that the postmodern text presents and the lack of determination and resolution that characterizes it. *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*. fluctuates between indifference and abstraction and the possibility of determination and resolution. This playful oscillation appears delusive towards the end of the novel, where the scenery for an apocalyptic ending becomes set. When Wayne and his friend, Lynch, arrive at the 'Burning Man Festival' in Black Rose Desert Nevada, they are welcomed with a banner that reads 'Welcome to Nowhere'. The festival is set in the middle of the dessert and, as Wayne describes,

[i]t was hard to avoid thoughts of the apocalypse out there. The place looked like a giant crater, reminiscent of the aftermath of large asteroids and large, merciless bombs. The desert floor was flat as a board, a fissure surface of the bright white alkaline clay, beaten down by winter rain, baked solid by the sun. A large brown mountain chain rose up all around, the lip of the crater. Somewhere in the middle of it all sat Black Rose City, a spirited

exercise in organized chaos, laid out in a careful configuration beneath a wild and wholly unpredictable sky.<sup>58</sup>

Thousands of people concentrate once a year in Black Rose Desert to construct an ephemeral small town and recreate a community in utopian terms: the people attending the festival are not simply an audience but participate in the makings of the town, constructing projections of their ideas of a perfect community. From entire neighborhoods of black light, as with The Black District, to people in space suits handing candy, the region signifies a space that blurs the boundaries of fantasy and reality. The town is shaped as a horse pedal and has streets that are named after body parts (Knee Lane, Throat Road, Brain Boulevard, Head Way, etc.) and roads that are named after the hours of the clock.<sup>59</sup> The culmination of the events that take place in this ephemeral body appears to come with the celebration of the burning of a high wooden structure in the shape of a man, which signals the end of the festival. This apocalyptic festivity of the burning of the wooden man, a structure symbolic of the self that one was, indicates a wish for a renewal.<sup>60</sup> The ritualistic fire setting signifies a need for the rebirth of man. As in the rise of the Phoenix, the ashes of the burned man become a reminder for the enactment of a wish for a new start and a harmonization with the true qualities of the self. The festival aspires to inspire a renewed perception of reality.

*Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* does not end with the celebratory burning of the wooden man and the revelation of a truer identity but, in a final reversal, with a letter. In the very last pages of the novel the reader is presented with Wayne's mail to Amanda's parents. Amanda's parents are unaware of their daughter's abortion and throughout the story and his travels Wayne appears troubled about whether he should convey that information to them. In this last point, revelation is once more suspended, as Wayne refrains from the responsibility of

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<sup>58</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 280.

<sup>59</sup> Wayne lives at 8:30, on the Avenue of the Heart.

<sup>60</sup> See Figure 3 on page 198.

disclosing Amanda's secret. Though he confesses that he had come to 'no conclusions' and had 'no grand epiphany or definitive success of any kind', Wayne appears to have come to the understanding that the knowledge of that fact about Amanda's past, the awareness of facts, data or events, cannot lead to the understanding of things: 'nothing in this world has any inherent meaning, [...] nothing means anything until we ascribe meaning to it in our minds. Maybe the answer is that there are no answers. Maybe instead of looking for certainty and exactitude in the universe, I'm better off trying to build meanings within myself'.<sup>61</sup> *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* ends with this letter that embraces the possibilities of meaning not as revelatory but as the means of the *peripatetic* of life and language. We cannot know if Wayne actually posted the letter or if the letter has reached Amanda's parents but what matters more here is the sense that Wayne's transformation does not end here but continues on in the *post-* and after the end of this novel.

*Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* is a story about Wayne's continuous transportation and transformation. 'We need more amphibians' writes Hartman in a discussion about encouraging different approaches to interpretation and reading.<sup>62</sup> Wayne appears to be such an amphibious character: his interpretation of his encounters adapts to a transparent and uninvolved style, which allows for words to speak for themselves. This becomes evident in the sudden but repeated insertions of lists and dictionary definitions of words that do not always appear immediately relevant to Wayne's narrations. Wayne's writings invite different readings to the stories he narrates. He appears, then, as an every-man, suited and adaptable to his surroundings. At the same time, however, Wayne does not appear to belong anywhere and this emerges as the root of a continuous displacement. 'Facing the strangeness in others, we become more aware of the other in ourselves: of what within remains ambivalent,

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<sup>61</sup> Listi, *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.*, 355, 356.

<sup>62</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 95.

unintegrated, in between.’<sup>63</sup> The amphibian qualities of metamorphosis and adaptation, which are essential for survival in variable environments, are also vital for Wayne’s survival. The capacity to acclimate and accommodate intricate qualities seems to be, then, the only way.

### 5.5. Conclusion: In the Post.

Listi’s novel starts from the end, in beginning with Amanda’s death. The progressive journey is an attempt to establish understanding and ‘figure out what everything means’ but this hope is displaced by a quest for survival.<sup>64</sup> Wayne’s *peripatetic* steps bring him to the Black Rose Desert, which appears as another Golgotha, when the burning of the wooden man takes place.<sup>65</sup> The eschatological burning of the man, who appears symbolic of the contemporary fallacies of postmodern life, signifies another form of social death, bringing on a post-apocalyptic hope for creating or projecting an authentic self. Wayne’s progress is in that sense a (Hegelian) questioning of the possibility of absolute knowledge and representation. Yet the play and experimentation with the idea of fixed meanings through the use of definitions and lists exposes that the only certainty in the postmodern condition is that of the *peripatetic* journey.

Listi’s novel may not be travel writing but it approaches writing as travel. Danielewski suggests that writing is ‘a way of exploring the dimensions of this world. In some ways, the way a mathematician can reach the end of the universe without traveling there using the language of numbers, there’s a way to reach the ends of the heart and soul using words.’<sup>66</sup> In a similar tone, in his essay “Progress in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*”, Stanley Fish suggests that Bunyan explores language’s adequacy or capacity of articulating truth. Fish approaches

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<sup>63</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Listi, *Attention Deficit Disorder.*, 355.

<sup>65</sup> As the biblical name of the place where Jesus was crucified, Golgotha, the place of a skull, resembles the Black Rose City’s anatomical structure and naming.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?p=94965#post94965>

meaning in terms of experience, while Wallace Stevens's suggests that in *The Pilgrim's Progress* the poet 'comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination, which it is his affair to try to get at.'<sup>67</sup> Hartman's critical contribution may not elucidate the creative process in clear or definitive ways but the application of his critical contribution to postmodern texts expands on and enriches the different representations of meaning.

Stevens writes that it is not that 'there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality.'<sup>68</sup> If modernism reflects the aftermath of a world that has lost its innocence and nostalgia for a lost order that directs inward reflection, the emergence of postmodernism after the Second World War signals the need for finding new ways to deal with that wound. The postmodern traveler does not endorse an annihilating detachment from reality but seeks to re-evaluate our perception of the real. This reconsideration is not didactic and does not seek to anticipate or prevent future horrors; it is a response to a cultural numbness that emerges from an understanding of limitations within a postmodern world that predicates the demise of boundaries. As with Bunyan's Christian, the place of Deliverance is not a final destination; Wayne's journey presents us with the *post* delivery of a correspondent.

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<sup>67</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. (New York: Vintage, 1951), 115.

<sup>68</sup> Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 22.

Figure 3

Image of a wooden structure in the shape of a man, from the 2009 Burning Man Festival.



## Chapter 6

### The (Con)Tent of the Literature of Criticism.

‘[L]iterary commentary at its best *is* literature’<sup>1</sup>

This final chapter explores the position and nature of critical writing in the postmodern condition. I begin by focusing on a primary complexity of the postmodern text: its mixture and incorporation of different discourses. Hartman’s understanding of the nature of the essay proposes a similar mixture in suggesting that criticism should be both critical and creative. Yet, at the same time, Hartman’s cultural criticism connotes his reservation on the postmodern mixture of diverse artistic expressions. To address this issue, I focus on Margaret Atwood’s *The Tent* (2006), a collection of short stories, poetry and fictional essays. Atwood’s mediation of different styles and Hartman’s understanding of the essay as a mixture of technical and poetic language appear closely related. I will question whether the inclusion of poetry and prose in Atwood’s collection proposes an understanding of the essay as metafiction in the postmodern. If *The Tent* is both a literal and critical contribution then it may be indicative of the reconciliation between the creative vain of the author and the hermeneutical spirit of the critic, enabled by postmodernism. The section “Hartman’s ‘New Ethic’ and Literary Criticism in the Postmodern Condition” analyzes and responds to Hartman’s reservations about the postmodern. “Second Nature: The Fictional Essay and the Short Story” looks more closely to the implications that develop by proposing the nature of the essay and the short story as subordinated to the literary text. The chapter concludes with a

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<sup>1</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journeys of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 66.



section that seeks to review the relation of metafiction to postmodern fiction and Hartman's advocacy of the 'literature of criticism'.

### **6.1. Introduction: In Attention.**

The postmodern text's complexity has often been attributed to its amalgamation of diverse artistic forms and the intermixing of different creative discourses. The all-inclusive nature of postmodern literature combines and fuses heterogeneous modes of expression by adopting the marginalized and displacing the conventional. This unison creates the impression of a postmodern artistic 'body' (*corpus*), an (in)corporation that associates and mixes authoritative and peripheral voices under the same cluster – the postmodern core or genre. However, as we have seen, this sense of totalizing unity may be deceptive: if postmodernism's inclusiveness proposes a heterogeneous and accommodative embrace for becoming or being 'in' - *inserted* and *incorporated* in the postmodern condition – then, what is it that lies *outside* the realm of the postmodern? In its all-inclusiveness, the postmodern tendency of seeking to relate to the artistically marginal has sometimes been perceived as presenting the generic as eclectic and, even more, as a *fin-de-siècle* trend for exclusivity (an assumption supported by postmodernism's equivocation).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the rejection of conventional forms of discourse in some postmodern approaches has tainted the postmodern with an uncomfortable sense of refutation. Yet, the wide dissemination of these different approaches to the nature of the postmodern would not have been possible without the technological progress that conditions the postmodern. Today, the world wide web ensures that everything is available and accessible to everyone. In literary criticism, the consequences of that availability and the complexities that some criticism presents have often resulted in the

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<sup>2</sup> The works of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, John D. Caputo, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Judith Butler, to name a few, have been approached and accused of favouring obscurity, because they seek to address the marginalized or the 'other'.

eschewal of specialized language in scholarly writing. The anxiety of intellectual form sounding intellectualized and, thus, representative of what postmodern art claims it has forsaken (high art and a culture nourished by divisions) may result in the neglect of some critical aspects and so prove restrictive for the postmodern. The crucial question postmodernism presents to literary criticism is how inclusive or exclusive literary criticism is (or should be). This chapter seeks to explore the nature of critical writing in the postmodern and examine how a contemporary suspicion and mistrust of the critical essay becomes manifested in the postmodern text.

In literary criticism, Geoffrey Hartman has repeatedly raised questions about the style of the critical essay and the position of the literary critic. In considering the nature of academic writing, Hartman proposes an appreciation of poetic language and the application of lyricism to philosophical thought and interpretation, and his style testifies eloquently to his perception of the essay. Hartman's writing style mixes imaginative and technical language in a manner that has often troubled and continues to challenge a lot of his commentators. Still, he is very explicit when he repeatedly denounces a distinction between critical and creative writing. In his essay "The Recognition Scene of Criticism", for example, Hartman openly declares that criticism 'is not extraliterary, not outside of literature or art looking in: it is a defining and influential part of its subject, a genre with some constant and changing features.'<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to the collection *Easy Pieces*, he concedes that he aims for a 'mixed style' that, as well as being inventive, 'examines and regulates'.<sup>4</sup> While he remains cautious about merging different discourses, Hartman's critical writing fuses the creative and critical in order to reinvigorate and promote criticism.<sup>5</sup> For Hartman, the differences between

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "The Recognition Scene of Criticism", *Critical Inquiry*, 4, 2 (1977): 410.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), x.

<sup>5</sup> Hartman warns that if 'we enter too much into fantasies of incorporation (so that everything becomes body or part of a body) we close the book we are writing.' Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 19.

the essay and other discourse should be respected but critical writing should not be regulated. The combination of imaginative and specialized language may expand not only criticism's appeal to a greater reading audience but, more significantly, its scope resulting in a greater referential field. Ironically, it is Hartman's wish to promote essay writing by merging technical and imaginative language that presents a challenge to his readers and commentators.

What has been perhaps overlooked or mitigated is that Hartman offers a solution for the challenge his work presents. For Hartman, the common factor between critical and any other writing is language and, in emphasizing the significance of attending to language through close reading, Hartman proposes that we have to read criticism with the same attention and intensity we do literature. In his introduction to *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, Hartman notes that 'the technique of close reading, [...] has been applied almost exclusively to creative writing rather than to criticism or nonfictional prose' and presents his work as 'an attempt to bring together [his] reading of criticism with [his] reading of literature: to view criticism, in fact, as within literature, not outside looking in.'<sup>6</sup> Close reading should also apply to the reading of the essay and Hartman's critical work rejects the division between the critical and creative.

Hartman is not just a literary critic: his other work also includes play-writing and verse. The acclaim of his critical contribution may have overshadowed his poetry but, as a versatile writer, Hartman is not alone in this position. Margaret Atwood, an acknowledged and celebrated contemporary novelist, has also written essays, short stories and poetry, which have not enjoyed the same critical acclaim as her fiction. Reingard M. Nischik suggests that there is always a 'danger that one branch of a multitalented author's work should languish in

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 1.

relative critical neglect' and particularly for Atwood's short stories, he notes that critical reception may be affected by 'an implied genre hierarchy, which, at least in the mind of the general public, gives precedence to the novel over other forms of literary expression.'<sup>7</sup> This could explain the moderate critical response to Atwood's short fiction. In exploring Atwood's short story writing, this chapter will focus on the relation of the short story to the novel, in order to examine how the short story's subordination to larger works of fiction may become manifest in Atwood's short fiction.

The sparse critical responses to Atwood's short stories may attest to the complexity her short fiction presents. As with postmodern fiction, the definition of short fiction has been the object of much critical debate but it may be broadly summarized as the continuing critical oscillation between determining the short story comparatively to the novel (and as a 'shorter' piece of writing) and treating it as an altogether unique form, with its own principles and history. Atwood's short stories are responsive to both of these critical approaches to short fiction: they echo the possibility of a larger, untold tale while, at the same time, they draw the reader in a distinctive reading experience. It is, then, this flexibility of Atwood's short fiction and the simultaneous sustaining of two different identities that presents a further challenge for critical commentary. Here, I will attempt an interpretation of Atwood's short story collection *The Tent* that attends to both of these two different tendencies of intertextuality and condensation.

When Atwood discusses the nature of the short story, she relates it comparatively to the genre of the novel. In the same year of the publication of *The Tent*, another collection of short stories, *Moral Disorder* (2006), was released. In an interview for the publication of *Moral Disorder*, Atwood defines the short story as a condensed story that does not need to retain a

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<sup>7</sup> Reingard M. Nischik, "Margaret Atwood's Short Stories and Shorter Fiction" in Carol Ann Howells, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145.

plot (as with the novel).<sup>8</sup> However, she diverts from this understanding of short fiction when she discusses her own collections. Atwood claims that she does not consider *Moral Disorder* a collection of short stories but rather, ‘a book of stories’.<sup>9</sup> The distinction appears necessary considering Atwood’s initial exposition on the nature of the short fiction: if short stories do not require the unifying thread of a plot that holds a novel together then her collection is different in recreating one. In *Moral Disorder*, the characters reappear in different stories and times of their lives and while each story may be considered in its unity, they are also a part of a larger tale, which, although appearing as episodic and lacking the coherence of a unifying plot, captures the significance of particular moments (as photographic pictures). For this reason, Atwood prefers to consider her collection not as an incorporation of discrete stories (they are ‘not the box of assorted chocolates’) but as an ‘intermediate form’, that relates and attends to the ‘in-between’ or mediatory nature of representation.<sup>10</sup> Atwood’s comments on *Moral Disorder* are characteristic of her understanding of the short story as not independent but mediative and communicating or communicative of other tales.

While in *Moral Disorder* the sustaining of a main character becomes the narrative technique that enables the conveyance of the short story’s intermediate form, Atwood’s *The Tent* appears more challenging in lacking such a unifying thread. Offering stories that appear more independent from each other, Atwood seems to contradict her assertion of the short story as an intermediate form and may be perceived as taking a turn for a more conventional short story telling. Furthermore, the ‘sister’ of *Moral Disorder* presents us with another challenge: in this book of stories, the reader finds an elaborate assortment of different writings incorporating poetry, short fiction, her own illustrations and other tales. The mixture

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<sup>8</sup> Charlie Rose, “A conversation with author Margaret Atwood”, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Accessed June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/30>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

of genres and forms and the absence of a narrative technique that can impart a sense of continuity, distinguishes *The Tent* from the rest of Atwood's short fiction.

What is particularly intriguing about *The Tent* is that its publishers have promoted it as a 'collection of smart and entertaining fictional essays.'<sup>11</sup> Considering the incorporation of poetry and prose, Atwood's *The Tent* raises the question of the position and perception of the essay in the postmodern condition. Is *The Tent* promoting an understanding of literary criticism as a kind of metafiction for the postmodern condition, which continues on modernist concerns and transgresses the form of the text? To agree with the hypothesis of Atwood's short stories as metanarratives would be to reaffirm Atwood's understanding of the short story as an 'intermediate form'. At the same time, however, Atwood's fictional essays and critical style may also be in agreement with Hartman's understanding of the essay. Atwood's 'intermediate form' echoes Hartman's recognition of his writing style as a mixture of different styles. In approaching Atwood's collection as both a literary and critical contribution, this chapter will attempt to examine if the creative spirit of the author can be reconciled with the critical spirit of the interpreter in the postmodern text.

## **6.2. Hartman's 'New Ethic' and Literary Criticism in the Postmodern Condition.**

Critiques of the postmodern have often approached its incorporative tendencies with suspicion.<sup>12</sup> The accommodative space or merging ground of the postmodern may seem as too unstable a *topos* for providing a deliberation that goes beyond mere acknowledgement. Hartman's cultural and literary criticism develops an understanding of postmodernism that is characteristic of a conservative approach. His reservations and even mistrust of the

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<sup>11</sup>Margaret Atwood, "The Tent", accessed June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011, <http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/atwood/tent.htm>

<sup>12</sup> For example, Frederic Jameson develops the concept of pastiche as indicative of postmodernism's demotic nature while, at the same time, he argues for postmodernism's 'less original' nature. Michel Foucault reveals a different critical aspect to the suspicion of postmodernism's incorporation, when he repeatedly rejects the label of postmodernism in his interviews, positioning himself 'outside' the postmodern.

postmodern are evident, not only by the small extent of his commentary on the topic but, more significantly, from the dispirited communication of his apprehensions about a 'new age' of literature. What Hartman finds suspect in postmodernism is predominantly its affirmation and confirmation of most acts of artistic expression. Even when he recognizes that the element of inclusion and accessibility is one of the challenges that the postmodern condition presents us with, or furthermore, that it is through these historical moments of chaos that great art becomes produced, Hartman remains cautious about the postmodern approach. It is perhaps curious that he appears unconvinced by postmodern literature, considering the style of his critical writings, which merges and combines not only different discourses but also different art forms, from cinematography and contemporary Hollywood films, to photography or music and opera. Indeed, one of the difficulties in Hartman's writings is his immense scope of knowledge and intertextual references. The question arises as to why is it that Hartman remains so reserved about the postmodern, despite the similarities or parallels between postmodernism and his critical style. Given that his critical work is characterized by an analogous inclusiveness and the fusion of different discourses and writing styles, it is surprising that Hartman should regard the postmodern turn as problematic. To respond to this concern, this section will begin by developing Hartman's understanding of the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

In his examination of issues of representation and mediation, Hartman traces modernism back to Wordsworth and his idea of Nature. In *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, he inquires whether Wordsworth is a 'nature poet or a reluctant visionary' and proposes that this evident conflict in Wordsworth's poetry 'may actually reflect an antinomy in the idea of the Modern':

Attempting to break through to nature (to more direct possibilities of feeling and speaking) Wordsworth discovered the apocalyptic tenor of this attempt,

and so draws back from (re-veils) revelation. Modernism as we have come to know it – and Post-Modernism too – is perhaps less conscious than Wordsworth of a contradiction that besets its desire for the unmediated. The new, quasi-erotic simplicity it claims is strangely apocalyptic in vigor of demand.<sup>13</sup>

The conflict between Nature and vision and the struggle for unmediation that Hartman traces in Wordsworth, leads him to propose the poet as one of the first modernists. While the unveiling qualities of Nature appear too much for Wordsworth's sensibility, according to Hartman, the arrival of modernism inaugurates a more compromised perception of the affliction of the revelatory nature of Nature. Gradually, the struggle for an unmediated vision becomes *moderated* in *modernism* (and as Hartman argues in the passage above, in postmodernism too).

Furthermore, Hartman observes a parallel development between poetry and philosophy in the 1930s. In *Beyond Formalism* he draws on the works of Frederick Louis MacNeice, Robert Graves and Robert Lowell to argue that, at that time, poetry attests to a cultural merging, characteristic of the modernist wish for cultural equitability. Hartman suggests that the poetry of the 30s 'was about consolidation and levelling'; in the process of such cultural adjustments '[w]here can modernism go? Only toward itself.'<sup>14</sup> In modernism, the rejection of realism established a sense of self-consciousness and directed the artist's eye ('I') to look inwards. Hartman suggests that modernist self-consciousness had its effect not only on art but also in philosophy, denoting a parallel levelling tendency in philosophical thought and literary criticism. According to Hartman, the critical world began to address itself 'to peers or

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<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Hartman ed. *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), viii.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 258, 275.



friends – in short, to a class of equally cultured people.’<sup>15</sup> When in *Minor Prophecies*, Hartman examines what happened in English criticism between 1920 and 1950, he concludes that in essence, ‘nothing happened’ – ‘The happening was on the side of art and literature; and the courage of the critic lay in acknowledging the newness or forwardness of modernist experiments.’<sup>16</sup> While modernist writers attacked bourgeois values, articulating in that way the modern art ideology, the critical world appeared engrossed in the recognition, representation and incorporation of the modernist concerns in the critical discourse and canon.

If the movement of modernism directed artistic and critical attention ‘inwards’ and to the self, the postmodern turn came to bring upon a reengagement with the world, by moving the creative and philosophical eye on the ‘outside’. At the same time, the rejection of grand narratives opened the way for a new appreciation of multiplicity and the marginalized cultural voices. The postmodern condition suspects any form of unity, including that of the unity of the ‘self’; instead, it favours the enrichment of the artist or artifact with the involvement and merging of multiple modes of expressions of the real, celebrating versatility, variety and multiplicity. Still, what remains unclear and problematic for contemporary critical thought is how the postmodern incorporation of diverse modes of expression differs from modern experimentation. Hartman’s questioning appears vital when he challenges if we have really renounced modernism today: ‘Doesn’t it keep sticking to us, even in this “postmodern” era?’ he asks in his essay “The Philomela Project”.

The problem I discern is the spread of that diluted modernist ideology to every text used as a wedge to “open the canon.” Though postmodernism seems to assert the opposite by deprivileging the acknowledged work of art,

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<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture of Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>16</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 61.

it may simply be privileging the yet-unacknowledged work. The very notion of criticism is threatened by a proliferation of “significant” or “representative” works, not just by a proliferation of theories. Critical judgement, which had been austere and exclusive – in theory, if not always in fact – is asked to be compensatory and restitutive. The vitality, but also the confusion, of literary studies reflects this double burden: multiplying theories of reading, multiplying works that claim a share of greatness.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Hartman is arguing that the ‘yet-unacknowledged’ work of art may remain uncelebrated for good reason. Of course, Hartman is not reinforcing the preservation of some kind of archetype for literature. Yet it is clear that he distinguishes between interpretation or the close reading of a text, and a ‘pointed’ or intentional reading (or perhaps, over-reading), in the name of pluralism and diversity. The latter tendency is associated with a modern inefficiency: the use of the text as an example to ‘open the canon’. Similarly, in the postmodern, privileging an unacknowledged or marginalized text in order to support postmodern theory is implicitly proposing the text as representative or exemplary of that theory. Furthermore, postmodernism dismisses such endorsements as endangering the affluence and diversity of voices it seeks to interweave in its artistic web. In noting this dynamic, Hartman is suggesting that the voicing of the marginalized is not always a blessing.

In detecting the modernist influence in postmodern thought, Hartman articulates a challenging feature of postmodernity: its continuity with or complete rejection of modernist concerns. For Hartman, what emerges from the effects of the transition from modernism to postmodernity is a new ethical agency that affects culture, philosophy and critical thought. Hartman suggests that the inclusion and adoption of the marginalized or commonplace in the

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<sup>17</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 167.

postmodern may be precarious. In “Literary Criticism and the Future” he argues that today the

affirmation of everyday life has become something of an ethical principle. It involves an acceptance, even a celebration of the ordinary – this is all around us in contemporary philosophy and social thought. Yet the story of cultural relativism since the eighteenth century, while it has opened our eyes to human possibilities, both those actualized and those presumed to be avoidable for actualization, has also indicated two limits. Actualization leads to endless conflict, to heterogeneous and anomalous claims that are often too strong to be adjusted and so produce a history that may be colorful in retrospect but is as much the story of renewed oppression as of triumphant liberty. Or actualization reaches for divestment instead of an affirmation of difference, for a nonexotic and even unheroic sort of existence.<sup>18</sup>

Hartman suggests that in its re-association with the real, the postmodern fosters the incorporation and assertion of everyday life as emancipatory. Furthermore, he proposes that the verification and legitimization of the commonplace, as a kind of reinforcement or actualization of heterogeneity, may have adverse cultural effects, leading to a possible exaggeration of differences and/or indifference.<sup>19</sup> Hartman’s cultural critique of this new ethic is based on three reservations: firstly, he notes that this new ethical tendency ‘evades the human need for hierarchy, or reduces hierarchy to difference’ ignoring the need for denomination and distinction.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, drawing on Heidegger’s analysis of ‘the

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<sup>18</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 200-1.

<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek also argues that postmodernism affirms and, even more, gives rise to (rather than merges), cultural differences. Here, following Hartman’s dialectical ‘either/or’ regarding the emergence of a new ethic, I propose that difference in the postmodern condition may be seen as the cause of cultural indifference.

<sup>20</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 201.

inauthenticities of temporal existence (the world of *das man*)’ which he translates as an ‘affirmative emphasis on everyday life’ and a ‘minimalist move toward the refounding of a lost reality’, Hartman argues that the world today ‘is being alienated from the human imagination by a technology that was supposed to help us own the earth.’<sup>21</sup> His final point is that the emergence of an affirmative culture ‘could blunt the critical faculties at the point they are most needed.’<sup>22</sup> While Hartman’s concern about the emergence of a new ethic based on the affirmation of the commonplace differs significantly from a Habermasian approach that would seek to preserve modernist values, his signalling of the threats of a ‘new ethic’ appears grounded in a deeper, diachronic concern about the position of literary criticism and interpretation.

Hartman’s comments on the inauspicious elements of a postmodern pluralism does not examine whether privileging a particular piece of work is even possible in the postmodern condition; when the voice of the critic becomes one of (too) many, the centralization or exemplification of an unacknowledged piece of work appears unfeasible. When any theoretical work or critical interpretation has to contest in a symbiosis with other diverse literary approaches in the postmodern condition, the prominence of one critical work (or the impossibility of it) accords with the marginalization postmodernism locates and attempts to ‘deal with’ in art. The critical essay appears to suffer the same implications as the literary work, caused by the democratic wish for pluralism and diversity which permeates the postmodern. Furthermore, Hartman’s commentary on the emergence of a ‘new ethic’ may be perceived as a forewarning or, even, a didactic cultural interjection. The distinctive ‘lack of self-promotion’ that commentators have attributed to his work, could then be perceived as contrived.<sup>23</sup> But it seems to me that what Hartman seeks to move away from with his cultural

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<sup>21</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 201- 202.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 202.

<sup>23</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2010), 2.

critique is the theoretical or critical tendency of appropriation. In his interpretations Hartman is always seeking an original relation to the text and, in that sense, it is understandable that he notes a danger in approaches that pursue solutions and finding ways to 'deal' or 'come to terms' with the challenge that the postmodern text presents us with. What is neglected in Hartman's cultural commentary is the recognition that his critical approach offers a response to this tendency of appropriation. Hartman's attention to close reading and to 'listening' to the text refocuses and directs the critical eye (or ear) to language, rather than the affirmation of relations or appropriation.

Hartman's concern about the 'new ethic' may be dissipated with the application of close reading. The pluralism and diversity of the postmodern is not a virtue in itself but it only poses a threat when criticism ignores its critical function. Close reading implies that the task of the critic is interpretation and not theorization or philosophizing; this is perhaps why Hartman reminds us so often that he is not a philosopher or a theorist, insisting that his work is limited to an unpointed exploration of the text.<sup>24</sup> Hartman's close reading is not a methodological rationalization of the language of the text but a creative response to it. And although interpretation and the richness of language may be overwhelming, Hartman insists on a non-reductive appreciation of the literary text, which is not logocentric in setting up philology as another theology, but seeks to listen to and for other words, in order to heal the

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<sup>24</sup> For example, see Hartman's Introduction to *Wordsworth's Poetry* (particularly p. xi) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). Also, in the Preface to *A Scholar's Tale* Hartman refers to himself as 'someone who cannot call himself a theorist' (ix). As he explains: 'My essays tend to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, but they do have certain aims. One is to broaden literary interpretation without leaving literature behind for any reason: scientific truth, social productivity, evangelism. A second aim is to look inward toward the discipline of literary study itself.' Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, viii. With Hartman, theory and philosophy enter literary criticism through the preoccupation with language and to expand rather than direct literary studies. In *Easy Pieces*, Hartman suggests that what he writes 'remains practical criticism, though [he has] sought to enlarge it, to insist on a new *praxis* that would not neglect theory or the reflection on the social and institutional context.' Hartman, *Easy Pieces*, 208.

‘wounds’ words open.<sup>25</sup> As such, Hartman’s reservation about the ‘new ethic’ and a culture of affirmation appear to be grounded more in the position, role and way of reading in the postmodern condition, rather than the postmodern itself.

### 6.3. Second Nature: The Fictional Essay and the Short Story.

The process of reading plays a prominent role in Hartman’s criticism, which becomes evident through his close analysis of particular texts and his critique of academic and cultural conditions. For Hartman, reading is not a supine but an active endeavour that deciphers the great work of art from a chaotic mixture of the superlative with the poor artefact, which occurs in the postmodern.<sup>26</sup> Hartman is very specific about what constitutes close reading. In *Criticism in the Wilderness* he identifies two parameters that frame the reading experience: ‘in any significant act of reading, there must be (1) a text that steals our consent, and (2) a question about the text’s value at a very basic level: are we in the presence of a forged or an authentic experience?’<sup>27</sup> While the later factor leads Hartman to questions of authenticity, the first element of reading implies a transgression: the text that ‘steals’ our approval is a text that tricks us and challenges our perception and conventional or familiar forms.<sup>28</sup> The text that is capable of inducing such an ‘authentic steal’ of our favour is a text that causes its reader to wish to unveil that ‘stealing’. It is this wish for an unveiling that Hartman finds problematic, however, warning that it may inspire readings that seek revelations and the disclosure of

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Faith in literary studies is hard to maintain because faith in words is hard to maintain.’ Hartman, *Easy Pieces*, xii. Hartman comments on his fear of transposing philology as another theology today, in *A Scholar’s Tale* (see particularly 61).

<sup>26</sup> Hartman clarifies his position on the distinction between high and low art in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, where he suggests that there is ‘a fear in us that to abandon the concept of the primary or classic work would mean ushering in chaos again: mingling great with inferior, primary with secondary or even trivial. But I am arguing against, not for, chaos. If certain works have become authoritative, it is because they at once sustain, and are sustained by, the readers they find. Only when the work of reading is taken as seriously as the work of art is confusion avoided.’ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Rogerson notes that in a ‘less formal discussion of the writing progress’ Atwood ‘reveals herself as a “trickster creator.”’ Margaret Rogerson, “Margaret Atwood and Uncertainty: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff”, *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, 19.1 – 3 (2009/2010): 88.

ultimate truths. Hartman remains concerned about an organized tendency that seeks realization and actualization, which accompanies academic readings today. He observes that '[w]e now experience and read scanningly, as if our "reading matter" – perhaps the world itself – had no immediate value but was meant simply to be known and stored.'<sup>29</sup> To unveil the 'stealing' of the text is not to simply expose the techniques of the trickster or to display the hoard; that does not communicate the art of the stealing. Hartman suggests that a reading that appreciates the text's seduction and mastery is a reading that produces another text; so, the critic's story should not seek clarifying solutions but the rethinking and rewriting of the text.

'*The critic*' writes Hartman 'is one who makes us formally aware of the bewildering character of fiction. *Books* are our second Fall, the reenactment of a seduction that is also a coming to knowledge.'<sup>30</sup> The ease with which Hartman progresses from the idea of the *critic* to that of the critic as the writer of *books* (in re-enacting the effects of the original text) is indicative of his association of creative and critical writing. More importantly, however, what emerges here is Hartman's conception of the critical text as *second* to the primary or original work of fiction. In coming second (as *post* or after), the essay resembles the short story, which has also been defined as secondary to the novel. In the introduction to *The New Short Stories Theories*, Charles E. May suggests that in contrast to Edgar Allan's Poe understanding of the short story as superior to the novel, some theorists, such as Mary Louise Pratt, argue that,

the relationship between the novel and the short story is "asymmetrical,"  
that the short story is secondary to and dependent on the novel – which is,  
historically, the dominant, normative genre. Thus, Pratt claims, because the

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<sup>29</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, 251.

<sup>30</sup> Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 21.

short story cannot be defined except by comparison to the novel it must therefore be dependent on the novel. Like [Suzanne] Ferguson and [Graham] Good, Pratt reminds us that shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but can only be seen as relative to something else.<sup>31</sup>

It seems that for Pratt, Ferguson and Good, size matters, but what becomes clear through the theoretical debate about the relation of the short story to longer narratives is that the definition of the short story has troubled the critical world significantly, specifically because short stories have been approached as subsequent to fiction. This secondary nature of the short story implies the significant role of short fiction as intrinsic to the appreciation of longer fiction. Similarly, Hartman's idea of the essay as a second writing, a re-writing that makes us 'aware of the bewildering character of fiction', positions the essay as key for the appreciation of literature.

As in the case of the short story and Hartman's idea of the essay, postmodern literature has also been approached in comparative (*secondary*) terms and as the reworking of modernist concerns.<sup>32</sup> In a sense, 'second' writing (after modernism, the primary text or the novel) defines the struggle that literary critics are faced with, in delineating modes of writing other than the novelistic form. Moving away from the novel, Valerie Shaw attempts to define the short story in relation not to fiction, but to 'painting, lyric poetry, or photography' suggesting that 'the short story is a form which is eternally preoccupied with devising ways to escape its own condition.'<sup>33</sup> However, Shaw's attempt to disassociate the short story from its subordination to the novel re-associates short fiction as secondary to other artistic modes. While the nature of the short story may be invoking different artistic modes metaphorically, as Shaw proposes, the postmodern text employs and adopts these different (secondary) modes

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<sup>31</sup> Charles E. May, *The New Short Stories Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), xv-xvi.

<sup>32</sup> See Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib "Modernity versus Postmodernity", *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (1981): 3-14.

<sup>33</sup> Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983), 16.



of expression incorporating them in its own textual field. In Atwood's *The Tent*, we find a collection of short stories that is postmodern in incorporating other (*secondary*) modes of discourse, such as poetry, fairytale and the essay, adopting them and consequently, transgressing the nature of short fiction.

Atwood's collection is not a typical organization or incorporation of short stories in the body of a book; it includes some of her own sketches, poems, tales, prose and what her publisher and reviewers referred to as mini-fictions and fictional essays. If Atwood was not already established as one of the most acclaimed contemporary woman writers, *The Tent* may have been approached as an exposition of her many literary talents. In that sense, the collection does not serve to represent Atwood's artistry and talent in the realm of the great writers of our times or to testify to her articulate and versatile writing. Atwood is not a marginalized or uncelebrated voice in literature. What *The Tent* exposes, however, is Atwood's perception of what constitutes a story. For Atwood it seems that any discourse, narrative or work of art tells a tale. Having written prose, poetry, short stories, essays and children's fiction in the past, *The Tent* appears representative of a writer that refuses categorization. Atwood famously stated in the International Literary Festival 'Word' in London in 1999 that 'there are too many of me' and for that plurality and multiplicity, she has been both celebrated and denounced as a writer. *The Tent* appears to become a shelter for the/her voice and writing hand, by bringing different forms of writing together. This composition seems to be progressing from one story or poem to the next, in order to tell a different, grander story.

*The Tent* harmonizes Atwood's many voices as an author; it offers the space for each to sound both in their individuality and as part of a larger corpus. Perhaps Atwood's other writings require some sort of mutilation; like another Philomela, her fiction, poetry and other prose respectively, may impose, each time, a certain 'cutting of the tongue' for a specific

discourse to emerge, a deprecation or ‘quieting’ of certain features, in order to construct and produce a particular discourse. In *The Tent*, these voices can not only co-exist, but surface individually and in accord, as in the composition of a song, where different instruments follow different music sheets to orchestrate a musical piece. It is, then, not an accident that Atwood’s collection begins with a disfigurement or deformation, a story about the segregation and disburdening of identity, which sets up and focuses the reader’s attention to the part or partial. ‘Life Stories’ deals with the destruction or deconstruction of a corpus, the narrator’s body of self, that starting as a ‘whole’ and a unity, progresses with age to become a ‘hole’, an empty place that offers the accommodating space for the whispering ‘I’ to sound: ‘I’m working on my own life story. I don’t mean I’m putting it together; no, I’m taking it apart. It’s mostly a question of editing. If you’d wanted the narrative line you should have asked earlier, when I still knew everything and was more willing to tell. That was before I discovered the virtues of scissors, the virtues of matches.’<sup>34</sup> As the authorial and narrative ‘I’ merge, the scissors that sever and the matches that scorch edit away the excess to focus the reader’s eye to the ‘I’, the one, isolated final word with which the story ends.<sup>35</sup>

This initial story about deconstructing the authorial self is followed by one that reflects on the necessity of assuming an identity for the purposes of writing. The one page long ‘Clothing Dreams’ is a recording of a recurring dream about dressing or dressing up, the covering of the body by putting on outfits that are inappropriate and do not fit. Language becomes the dress of thought but these old clothes of traditional forms appear excessive and unsuited although they keep returning in a dream, unconsciously, influencing the authorial voice. The effects of tradition and the negotiation with more conventional ways of expression appear as part of the process of writing. Yet Atwood not only has to negotiate tradition but

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Tent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 5.

also gender: 'Bottle' transcribes the dialogic exchange between a man and a woman negotiating the terms of their relationship. The man offers immortality in a bottle, a heap of dust with which the woman can 'always have a voice'.<sup>36</sup> However, he does not make it clear whether this magical dust allows the woman to either '[h]ave a voice, or *be* a voice'.<sup>37</sup> 'Impenetrable Forest' appears to explore the later possibility of 'being' a voice. This story is the transcription of a dialogue where a girl has the magical ability to erase the sorrows of a boy but, after alleviating all his troubles, the boy shows no gratitude or relief and her powers prove useless. To 'be' a voice is to seek a purpose and thus assume a specific curating role. Such an utterance or being is determined by the drive to cure or rescue, to direct and guide, but, as the narrator in 'Encouraging the Young' confesses, this gesture of 'generosity' is didactic and suspect:

[M]y motives are less pure than they appear. They are murkier. They are lurkier. I catch sight of myself, in that inward eye that is not always the bliss of solitude, and I see that I am dubious. I scuttle from bush to bush, at the edge of the dark woods, peering out. *Yoo hoo! Young! Over here!* I call, beckoning with my increasingly knobby forefinger. *That's it! Now, here's a lavish gingerbread house, decorated with your name in lights. Wouldn't you like to walk into it, claim it as your own, stuff your face on sugary fame? Of course you would!*<sup>38</sup>

The 'I' of that voice or the being with the knobby forefinger, is the voice of an authoritative discourse that seeks to correct or rewrite the story (in this case, the fairytale of "Hansel and Gretel"). In attempting to retell the tale, this 'I' becomes representative of the modernist voice, which in rewriting a fairytale, looks to regain authority and control over the lost past.

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<sup>36</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 18-9.

But here, the narrator retracts and withdraws, refusing to ‘fatten [the young] in cages’ or ‘ply them with poisoned fruit items’, ‘change them into clockwork images or talking shadows’ and ‘drain out their life’s blood’, because the young ‘can do all those things for themselves.’<sup>39</sup> This resignation and the refusal of the narrator to end the tale reflects the recognition of the impossibility to ‘be’ a voice, an authoritative, unified, independent utterance that can steer and affect the future. In the face of this impossibility, the other option is ‘to have’ a voice.

The story ‘Voice’ explores the possibility of acquiring and developing a voice but approaches utterance as a separate entity. This implies a fragmentation between the body and the *phone*. The voice comes as a gift that the narrator feels obliged to nurture; but it becomes ‘attached like an invisible vampire to my throat’, feeding from the narrator’s body as a parasite.<sup>40</sup> The duality of host and voice is followed by further fragmentation of the narrative voice when in ‘No More Photos’ the narrator confesses: ‘I suffer from my own multiplicity.’<sup>41</sup> The fragmentation of identity is then followed by the exploration of the fragmentation of stories and language. ‘Orphan Stories’ offers multiple short versions about orphan children in singular brief paragraphs. This ‘matryoshka doll’ effect presents these paragraphs as representations of ‘orphan’ stories, the different narratives, modes or voices we adopt to communicate and approach storytelling and writing.<sup>42</sup> As with the orphans in the story, words and language appear desolate and separated from the authorial self that parents them. The home of words is not the author, but an ‘empty shell. A home filled with nothing but yourself. It’s heavy, that lightness. It’s crashing, that emptiness.’<sup>43</sup> When words lead to other words, the polyseme of language echoes a sense of loss. However, this is not the loss lamented in modernism, but rather a kenotic absence and the relinquishment of form that characterizes the

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<sup>39</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 23. The idea of voice as a gift is relevant to the idea of language as a gift from God.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>42</sup> ‘The written text cannot be questioned like a speaker; it *orphans* words by depriving them of a voice that is alive and present.’ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 29-30

postmodern condition and becomes reflected in the story's fragmentation. The last paragraph in 'Orphan Stories' imparts the receiving of letters by the orphans, loaded with accusations about people being frivolous and having misrepresented them, as dangerous or helpless. The receiver (and narrator) consoles the orphans: 'It is loss to which everything flows, absence in which everything flowers. It is you, not we, who have always been the children of the gods.'<sup>44</sup> As the reader becomes lost in the many short(er) stories each paragraph depicts, Atwood manages to convey that the experience of that loss and the fragmentation of form may be necessary for the survival of a second generation.

Orphan words appear to travel through Atwood's 'Gateway' to reach our ears with the 'Bottle II', the final story of Part I of *The Tent*. This first part of the collection explores not only the purpose and nature of the story but also that of the telling and the relation of the author to language in a world that rejects grand (long) narratives seeking an impossible independence. In 'Bottle II' there is a voice inside a bottle that addresses the reader directly, as the owner of the bottle: when '[y]ou took out the cork' there was a voice, '[m]y voice' the reader is told.<sup>45</sup> When you opened the book there was Atwood's voice, when you listened to the text you attended to the word, when you 'opened' the word there were echoes of meaning. This unveiling (the uncorking of the bottle) suggests reading as the instigation of a search for a vessel, a second form to hold the word (the voice) afloat.

My reading of Part I of Atwood's collection begins to unravel some of the many threads that the interpretation of *The Tent* sustains, by suggesting some critical and theoretical directions, but it does not compensate for the absence of what the publisher and reviewers of the book suggest that this book incorporates: the essay. In *The Tent* there is no direct address of critical writing and despite the promotion of the collection as including 'fictional essays' it

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<sup>44</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 38.

is hard to identify what is implied by that mode of exposition or in what ways a fictional essay is similar to or differs from the other prose or poetry of the rest of the book. Atwood's stories may be read as fictionalizing critical issues, offering a metaphorical space for their consideration or as stimulating critical discussion (as with any other text), but they are clearly not conventional essays or similar to her other critical contributions.

Atwood emerged as a critic with the publication of *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) which was followed by a number of anthologies of essays, articles and reviews, such as *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (1982), *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) and more recently, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), which transcribes Atwood's six lectures for the Empson Lectures at University of Cambridge in 2000. While Atwood 'seems to personify the merger of divergent critical traditions', the author as a critic has not been received particularly well, with *Negotiating with the Dead*, a collection that attempts to address the position of the writer, being criticised, perhaps ironically, for its lack of organization and verbal tone.<sup>46</sup> Walter Pache describes Atwood's critical progression and contribution:

Faced with Margaret Atwood's high profile as a public personality and the unmistakable frankness of her views one is tempted to regard her as a critic *sui generis*. But of course she occupies a specific position within the context of the critical debate and its changes during the past quarter century, even if it is not easy to determine exactly where to place it. Is it modernist or postmodern, feminist or nationalist, structuralist or deconstructivist? Opinions differ widely. The lack of consensus is aggravated by the fact that, despite the heated debate that has raged about *Survival* to this day, relatively

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Pache, "A Certain Frivolity": Margaret Atwood's Literary Criticism' in Reingard M. Nischik, ed. *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 120-1

little has been written about Atwood's role as a critic. Atwood seems to elude professional pigeonholing.<sup>47</sup>

Considering the difficulty of categorizing their work, Atwood and Hartman appear similar. Yet, while Atwood's writings do not offer an understanding of her conception of the essay, Hartman elaborates more on the issue. In his analysis of the essay and in seeking to enhance or broaden the idea of academic writing, Hartman's approach may appear unconventional, but is also more systematic than Atwood's. Hartman's *Minor Prophecies*, for example, evaluates the role of literary criticism and offers a new trajectory for the essay: 'Good critical writing does not judge or explain art in a coercive way; it evokes what Emerson called *the alienated majesty of our own thoughts*, thoughts neglected or rejected by us, and found again, here, in the restitutive work of the artist. We recognize in the artist, but also beyond him, our own potential genius.'<sup>48</sup> Atwood's fictional essays accord with Hartman's description of good essay writing, in reworking and exploring imaginatively tradition, as well as critical and theoretical concerns. Still, what in *The Tent* is described as fictional essays appears also as the exploration of 'a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction', according to Patricia Waugh's definition of metafictional writing.<sup>49</sup> Hartman's merging of the creative and critical in the essay may be a road already explored by the author with metafictional writing. Has the critic come second once more? The section that follows attempts to respond to that question by examining the difference between metafiction, postmodern fiction and Hartman's advocacy of the 'literature of criticism'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Walter Pache, "'A Certain Frivolity': Margaret Atwood's Literary Criticism' in Reingard M. Nischik, ed. *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13

<sup>49</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, 'How Creative Should Literary Criticism Be?' *The New York Times*, April 5, 1981.

#### 6.4. Metafiction or the Literature of Criticism?

The differences between the prefixes *post-* of postmodernism and *meta-* of metafiction are very subtle: they both signify something that comes ‘after’ and propose an advance ‘beyond’. But while *post-* means following, in the sense of ‘coming after’, denoting an understanding of that that is preceded, *meta-* comes ‘after’ by ‘taking after’ and moving in parallel or alongside an ongoing process. As compounds of *metafiction* and the *postmodern*, then, these prefixes are revealing. While the term ‘postmodernism’ suggests a historical movement beyond and another epoch, ‘metafiction’ comes through and follows the development of fiction. In *Scars of the Spirit*, Hartman indicates that the “[p]ostmodern” as a temporal marker [...] suggests a disenchantment that is final, or self-perpetuating. The period concept of modernity as breakthrough and decisive renewal seems to have lured us once too often.<sup>51</sup> Postmodernism signals a disenchantment and (re)acts on that disabuse. Waugh also describes metafiction in regards to seduction and in terms of disenchantment but instead of suggesting a (postmodern) rejection, she proposes that metafiction uses tradition to expose and lay bare the inadequacies of established, previous forms. Metafiction, she argues, is ‘a tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion.’<sup>52</sup> While the postmodern arrival aspires to a historical progression and projects a new cultural trajectory, metafiction concentrates on the progression of fiction, through and alongside traditional literary forms, and examines that continuation. Metafictional writing

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<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 137-8.

<sup>52</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, 14. Metafiction and deconstruction are closely related in Waugh’s definition of metanarratives. In regard to the issue of the seductiveness of the text, Hartman comments: ‘Seduction, then, in fiction or life, seems to contain the promise of mastery or, paradoxically, of joining oneself to an overwhelming intent even at the cost of being subdued. In more innocent language seduction is called *persuasion*; and rhetoric, or art of persuasion, has always been criticized by competing arts, such as logic and dialectic, which assert a higher truth without being less vulnerable to the charge of seeking a powerfull epiphany, or all-clarifying solution.’ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 22.



appears then more as ‘a mode of writing’, rather than a genre or a historical era, which Waugh locates ‘within a broader cultural movement often referred to as post-modernism.’<sup>53</sup>

Postmodern fiction may issue from the rejection of grand narratives or metanarratives, (grand stories that explain other stories by situating them within the totalizing structures of master narratives), but it is not incompatible with the mode of metafictional writing. While not limited to the postmodern, metafictional writing appears to thrive more in conditions that encourage reassessment and (self)criticism, such as the postmodern condition.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, in its (self)criticism, metafictional writing may also be identifiable in criticism and the essay. Both literary criticism and metafiction respond to a crisis within the novel and move to trace and determine traditional approaches and their influences in the development of fiction, assimilating and using established techniques and theories, in order to examine, transgress and reinvent the form of the novel. While metafiction undermines itself self-consciously, providing criticism in the work itself and drawing attention to the process of writing, criticism traditionally aims to be persuasive, self-affirmative and convincing. Furthermore, metafictional writing is usually traced in larger literary works and not in short stories, poetry or the essay. Atwood’s fictional essays in *The Tent* digress from that conventional understanding of criticism, since they steer away from becoming affirmatory, instructive or explanatory, corresponding more with Hartman’s rendition of the essay. Yet if Atwood’s fictional essays are identified as metafictional, is Hartman’s understanding of the essay as a creative reworking of the text, essentially metafictional also? To respond to this question, I will attempt firstly, to show how Atwood’s fictional essays may be considered metafictional and then, relate *The Tent* to Hartman’s critical style.

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<sup>53</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> All of the postmodern texts that this thesis examines can also be approached in metafictional terms, in that they draw attention to the writing process.

Part II of *The Tent* begins with a return to the past, to tradition, heritage and progeny. ‘Winter’s Tales’ repositions Shakespeare’s Hermione in a contemporary world, where as an old woman she recounts her frustration: the old lady prefers to tell stories about recipes and cooking these days, rather than the war stories the young want to hear. In ‘It’s Not Easy Being Half-Divine’ the narrator recalls Helen’s youth and tells of how she came to be famous and a celebrity in magazines, by abandoning her husband for a rich man. ‘Salome Was a Dancer’ is the story of a promiscuous young student who seduces her Religious Studies teacher and becomes a dancer only to end up dead in the dressing room of a strip club one night. These re-writings of grand narratives not only reposition myths about female seductresses in the contemporary world; they also reinvigorate them with new critical and cultural perspectives. At the same time, as metafiction, the new critical approaches to these mythical figures become voiced by narrators that cannot be trusted and who undermine their critique by projecting their comments either as gossip or as personal evaluations. The narrative voices establish a purview; the vantage point of this remove is what differentiates Atwood’s retellings from a more modernist approach to the revisiting of tradition, which follows the stream of consciousness and the protagonist’s interior monologue. ‘Plots for Exotics’ addresses the requirement of such distance but also of ‘scandalous’ and enticing characters in the makings of a story. Here, the protagonist visits a ‘plot factory’ looking for a job as a main character in a story but becomes rejected for being an ‘exotic’. Exotics are identified as characters that are ‘alien, foreign’: the beautiful, strange woman, the ‘amoral degenerate’, the comical servant, the best friend, the next-door neighbour, a coach, a wise person or other secondary characters that surround and accompany the ‘hero’ of a tale. The description of the ‘exotics’ becomes suggestive of the ‘other’ stories or writings that come after the main story in order to attend to it. In the resolution and aspiration of the job-seeker to create ‘a whole plot with nothing in it but exotics’ we may read Atwood’s aspiration for

this collection: to create a story that has no ‘one’ central direction, primary purpose or focal point, a story devoid of ‘self’, that is essentially secondary and thus, unheroic. Within such mediative form, the author can ‘play’ freely with words and revisit old stories without finding their influence oppressing or limiting.<sup>55</sup> As ‘Chicken Little Goes Too Far’ shows, with stories that ‘play’ with the word in such a manner, ‘[t]he sky’s the limit.’<sup>56</sup>

To be unheroic in the construction of a text – to devoid the narration of one main purpose or goal – is to relinquish the name as signification.<sup>57</sup> A name determines and represents but ‘names’, Hartman argues, ‘are a compromise’ since ‘no name is unique.’<sup>58</sup> In the poem ‘The Animals Reject Their Names and Things Turn to Their Origins’ the realization of this compromise comes with the revolt of a bear that denounces its name (‘bear’), which sets off a series of retractions.<sup>59</sup> Following the bear’s rebellion that becomes gradually supported by other animals, the inanimate world is re-aligned as ‘the dictionaries began to untwist,’ ‘the perfumes returned to France’ and ‘[p]riests gave their dresses up again / to the women’.<sup>60</sup>

Songs crammed themselves back down  
the throats of their singers,  
and a million computers blew apart  
and homed in chip by chip  
on the brains of the inventors.

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<sup>55</sup> The idea of ‘play’ is explored further in ‘Our Cat Enters Heaven’ where the cat (author) is directed by God to play with ‘souls of human beings’. Atwood, *The Tent*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 71. Indicatively, other stories in the collection that engage with metanarrative are ‘Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon’, ‘Take Charge’, ‘Resources of the Ikarians’, and ‘Horatio’s Version’.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Naming, like counting, is a strong mode of specification. It disambiguates the relation of sign to signified, making the proper term one end and the thing that is meant the other. Two terms complete the act; signification itself is elided, or treated as transparent.’ Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 352.

<sup>58</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, 95.

<sup>59</sup> ‘I’m not your totem; I refuse / to dance in your circuses; you cannot carve / my soul in stone. / I renounce metaphor: I am not / child-stealer, shape-changer, / old garbage-eater, and you can stuff / simile also: unpeeled, / I am not *like a man*. / I take back what you have stolen, / and in your languages I announce / I am now nameless. / My true name is a growl.’ Atwood, *The Tent*, 78.

<sup>60</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 79.

Squashed mice were shot backwards out of traps,  
brides and grooms uncoupled like shunting trains,  
tins of sardines exploded, releasing their wiggling shoals;  
dinosaur bones whizzed like missiles  
out of museums back to the badlands,  
and bullets flew sizzling into their guns.<sup>61</sup>

This regression of existence does not signify a return to an origin but the absolution of it. Without a name, things shed language and with it, meaning and the world reverts and rewinds as bodies become threads of protoplasm that come together ‘until there was only one of them, / alone at the first naming’.<sup>62</sup> But, without animals and deprived of a kingdom to rule over the unnamed, Adam returned to mud. Mud became the lava of an un-cooled earth, ‘a swirl of white-hot / energy, and the energy jammed itself / into its own potential, and swirled / like fluorescent bathwater / down a non-existent wormhole.’<sup>63</sup> In this reversal of Genesis, the unnamings and the renunciation of the word as a proper name for signification triggers this second Fall into non-existence. Atwood’s post-apocalyptic poem follows the unheroic thread back to an amorphous void, which is not cathartic but, rather, displays that without a ‘hero’ (a primary voice or text, literary tradition, or history) stories are impossible.<sup>64</sup>

It is significant that an exploration of the possibility of loss – of the name, language and meaning – and the realization of the necessity for a continuity of thought comes, in Atwood’s

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<sup>61</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 82. Also consider Hartman’s suggestion that the ‘fading of the proper name, then, is like the fading of the self in or into the literary work: its setting.’ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 77.

<sup>64</sup> The opposite of the lack of name and the dissolution of history is explored in the collection in the ‘Heritage House’, where the narrator finds him/herself in a house that is a storing place, jammed and overwhelmed with old tales. Here we have ‘all history’ and that results in a similar state of annulment, as we see in ‘The Animals Reject Their Names and Things Turn to Their Origins’.

collection, with a poem.<sup>65</sup> In its relation to fiction, poetry appears often as a secondary form. Nevertheless, poetry has an important role in Hartman's critical work, primarily by being the most common object of his close reading, but also by affecting the language and style of his literary criticism and his commentary on the future of the essay. As early as *Beyond Formalism*, Hartman moves to assert and re-establish the role of poetry in literature.<sup>66</sup> In *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust*, Pieter Vermeulen suggests that Hartman's theory of poetry plays a significant role in his response to the postmodern condition. Vermeulen relates Hartman's reservations on the postmodern to Alan Liu's understanding of criticism and contemporary culture which becomes defined by "an anxiety that may be called the fear of the loss of loss", to argue that that anxiety of loss affects 'Hartman's defense of poetry':

For Hartman, poetry's distinctive virtue is that it can demonstrate the continuing viability of experiences of loss. Because this demonstration takes place in a cultural situation where such experiences are no longer available, poetry becomes the placeholder of the possibility of loss *as such*. Poetry's cultural power consists in its affirmation of the possibility that things can still withdraw from the compulsive half-line of the present, and therefore of the hope that they can yet be restored to a condition that is more than that of an indifferent half-presence.

Through its affirmation of the possibility of loss, poetry holds out the promise of a future correction of culture's current condition.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Atwood revisits the theme of loss in 'Tree Baby'.

<sup>66</sup> In tracing the historical significance of poetry Hartman suggests that '[e]very epic we know has a political, or cosmopolitical, subject.' Tracing the development of poetry in the 1930s he argues that literary criticism attempted to establish criteria 'that would separate radical poetry from propaganda' and concludes that, today, '[u]nderstanding the relation of poetry and politics is to understand the independence of great art and popular art.' Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, 247, 248, 249.

<sup>67</sup> Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 73.

In the postmodern condition loss becomes impossible since everything becomes incorporated and stored and is, therefore, retraceable and retrievable. Hartman suggests that poetry reminds us that loss is not only possible but necessary for the constitution and communication of identity and meaning. In other words, that which evades or escapes us, defines us. Vermeulen argues that Hartman's affirmation of the loss of poetry is essentially corrective and that, as an antidote to the postmodern overflow of information and equivocation, poetry's loss allows Hartman to propose a reform, in order to 'limit the freeplay of the chaotic present.'<sup>68</sup> But Vermeulen's representation of Hartman's theory of poetry as supportive of a correction or reformation of the postmodern ignores Hartman's anxiety about nosological readings and fails to register the 'unpointed' style of Hartman's critical commentary. It is, then, wrong to claim that Hartman's defense of poetry implies the dissolution or exasperation of ambiguity. Hartman's criticism does not seek to restore the 'other' or that which is lost but to preserve the possibility of it, in language, literature and the essay, by instilling poetry's economy of language to all writing. This is why, as Vermeulen understands correctly, poetry 'is both the object and the exemplar of criticism' for Hartman.<sup>69</sup> Poetry helps us to 'overcome the desire for a fixed point or for some ultimate referent' (a 'hero' or main text in the case of *The Tent*) while at the same time it necessitates 'some point of orientation, even if it is merely fictional.'<sup>70</sup> Crucially, as Vermeulen notes, Hartman sees that this should be the case for criticism too.

Hartman's understanding of the essay revolves around the defamiliarization of the text and in that, poetry and lyricism becomes an essential part of the critical work. It seems, then, that while metafiction relates writing to fiction, Hartman relates writing to poetry. Atwood's metanarratives in *The Tent* may attempt to fictionalize or poeticize the essay, while for

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<sup>68</sup> Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 74.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 51.

Hartman all writing is (or should be) a mixture of poetic diction and prose. In “The Fate of Reading” Hartman explains:

There are modes of prose as of poetry. Criticism is such a mode. It would not be very fruitful to define this mode too sharply except to suggest that it always involves, directly or obliquely, the reading of specific texts. Criticism has to decide what “presence” to give to the text, from the simple question of how much of it to quote to the complex one of how to decide where a text ends or begins – since “textuality may lead us indefinitely on to other texts.

Additionally, a critic has to decide what *his* language is supposed to be doing; and in general he has two options. He may construct a *metalanguage*, analogous to the “poetic diction” of Pope or Mallarmé in its abstract reordering of terms; or he may construct a *paralanguage*, which subordinates abstract concepts by playing them off against the specificity of texts. The creation of metalanguage (“epidiction” might be a better word) has the advantage of consistency, purity, and seeming logic; its disadvantage, however, is that it remains an unhistorical “grammar,” a mental Latin rather than a lingua franca. The advantage of the more playful, indeed carefully promiscuous testing of terms in paralanguage, is that it reminds us that language is fate. The practice may degenerate, however, into paraphrase or intellectual glossolalia. (I admit to a variable style, which consists mainly of a playful dissolving of terms and abstractions, but one

that seeks to bring out their creative force as unrecognized “poetic dictions.”)<sup>71</sup>

Hartman’s parenthetical confession of a variable style defines his writing style as play. This allows Hartman to denounce divisions between creative and academic writing. If criticism is not outside literature looking in, then it should be allowed to participate and be morphed by the literature it is a part of and examines. Of course, criticism differs from prose and poetry, as it does from science but in developing from and demonstrating an experience of reading, the essay creates an alliance that Hartman refers to as the ‘literature of criticism’.<sup>72</sup> The expression is suggestive of the essay’s double function: it is both criticism (thus scientific and methodological) *and* literature (and, as such, creative). Furthermore, the fusion that the literature of criticism suggests is not infective or corruptive but offers the grounds for the application of close reading, because according to Hartman, criticism too should be read as closely as literature.

Hartman proposes that we cannot ‘deny the critical essay a dignity and even a creative touch of its own’ or allow for it to ‘be fobbed off as a secondary activity, as a handmaiden to more “creative” modes of thinking like poems or novels.’<sup>73</sup> Criticism may come ‘after’ the artifact and we may define its lateness and that ‘after’ as *post-* or *meta-* or ‘secondary’ to the text but Hartman insists on the creative value of the *afterthought* and the rethinking the essay entails as equally imaginative. The essay is not subordinate to the text, Hartman argues in *Minor Prophecies*, and the critic is not simply a facilitator, as in Atwood’s ‘King Log in

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<sup>71</sup> Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, 268.

<sup>72</sup> Hartman, ‘How Creative Should Literary Criticism Be?’ *The New York Times*, April 5, 1981.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



Exile', but 'a survivor or someone who comes late'.<sup>74</sup> The final part of *The Tent* begins with stories that elaborate on the idea of survival and the anticipation of an aftermath. Today, we want to go faster ('Faster'), to exceed our nature ('Eating the Birds'), and we anticipate the opportunity that will give rise to our latent unique qualities ('Warlords'). But there is something that still evades us in our visualization of this ambitious quest for the future, which emerges in Atwood's stories. These tales are tainted not with a fear of loss (or Liu's anxiety of the loss of loss) but with the realization that our imagination may not be enough to conceptualize, envision or predict that which is to come.<sup>75</sup> Drawing on Eric Santner, Hartman suggests, in *Scars of the Spirit*, that '[i]f postmodern critics mourn anything, it is the fantasy – the shattered fantasy – “of the (always already) lost organic society that has haunted the Western imagination.” We are asked to tolerate complex, hybrid concepts of personal and political identity.’<sup>76</sup> The postmodern imagination does not run free; it is under the constant pressure of facilitating heterogeneity as a tent and as its content.

The need for the representation of imagination has become more pressing in the postmodern condition. The homonomous short story 'The Tent' in Atwood's collection reflects on the struggle of the artist to represent while still maintaining an imaginative predisposition. After setting a narrative tent for the reader the narrator addresses us: 'The trouble is, your tent is made of paper. Paper won't keep anything out. You know you must write on the walls, on the paper walls, on the inside of your tent. You must write upside down

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<sup>74</sup> Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 36. Vermeulen draws a distinction between escape and survival in Hartman's trauma theory. He argues that Hartman's Romanticism 'thrives on an avoidance of (escape from) the utter negativity of trauma' and that in his trauma theory Hartman confuses the avoidance or escape from trauma, with survival. It is concerning that Vermeulen does not consider that escape may be as traumatic as survival and not just an evasion, or that survival may suggest nothing more than a biological hold on existence. Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Capturing the modernist moment Wallace Stevens describes the coming 'to the end of imagination' as the '[i]nanimate in an inert savoir' in his poem "The Plain Sense of Things". In the postmodern, the *savoir* becomes replaced by the requirements of the *vivre*. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 502.

<sup>76</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 144.

and backwards, you must cover every available space on the paper with writing.’<sup>77</sup> With the opportunity and even demand to publish one’s thoughts becoming greater, for a more heterogenous postmodern condition, the need to reveal is enhanced. It is that demand that is pressing in the postmodern that is brought forward by technological evolution and the accessibility of information. But outside the artist’s tent, there are other voices. In the story, the howlers lurking in darkness are attracted by the candle light in the tent: ‘You’re too conspicuous, you’ve made yourself conspicuous, you’ve given yourself away.’<sup>78</sup> The artist’s anxiety about protecting the writing and the story emerges through the threat posed by the external voices together with the understanding that the artistic vision cannot remain immutable.<sup>79</sup> When, in the end, the tent catches fire and the structure is exposed and destroyed, the unveiled artist keeps on writing. We must ‘keep on writing’ even without the protection of structure.<sup>80</sup> The voices outside the tent may sound threatening for the writer and his/her work but they must be sustained in literature and through the essay. The realization that we cannot shelter, protect or restitute the artifact or artist may be challenging for some critical approaches but what Atwood and Hartman appear to understand is that our only ‘tent’ is the text.

One thing that seems to always remain outside the postmodern and which the postmodern seeks persistently to reach for and adopt is imaginative innovation. This wish for

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<sup>77</sup> ‘You’re in a tent’ starts this story and outside ‘the noise is deafening’. Atwood, *The Tent*, 143, 144. On the idea of the artistic haven Hartman writes: ‘The arts as a whole constitute a nursery of forms that tolerates imaginings even in their grublike state, here they can mature to emerge some day as part of the collective (we now say cultural) memory.’

Art’s nursery of forms, then, is a reservoir. Or an archive that allows things to be at once saved and forgotten – forgotten through a benign neglect that permits more time for parturition, or because they seem useless for, removed from, society’s purposes. Today oblivion is often a necessity, like an induced power failure, a blackout that saves the whole grid when our attention is overwhelmed. Looking-away-from may therefore become, paradoxically, a mode of looking-for, as when a name has gone and we distract ourselves in the hope that it will suddenly reappear.’ Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 181.

<sup>78</sup> Atwood, *The Tent*, 145.

<sup>79</sup> ‘It’s an illusion, the belief that your doodling is a kind of armour, a kind of charm, because no one knows better than you do how fragile your tent really is.’ Atwood, *The Tent*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 146.

the ‘new’ is not a wish for a rebirth but for survival and in its quest it imparts what Hartman sees as an anxiety and ‘a strange inertia in our progressive thinking.’<sup>81</sup> The critical essay can dispel that atrophy with a variable style and a literature of criticism, which can provide shelter for the imagination and disperse indifference by stimulating thought. Hartman suggests in *Minor Prophecies* that,

[t]he best or worst that might be said about critical essays is that they are, despite themselves, minor prophecies that overread the signs of times. They are also, however, counterprophecies that light up contrary indications and the merely potential relation of the world of discourse to the world. In literary criticism the naming of what may come is not prophecy so much as the branch of a poetics described by Wallace Stevens, one that maintains us “in the difficulty of what it is to be.”<sup>82</sup>

In the postmodern ‘what it is to be’ and ‘what is to be’ oscillate the literary text between the highs of literary tradition and the lows of online blogs, the certainty of form and our release from it. The postmodern text aspires to become ‘a tent’, a collection and accommodative space but, Hartman questions whether it can escape dialectic oppositions implied through this in-betweenness and intermediacy: ‘Can we manage without a vocabulary of rise and fall? Can epochalism – the division of history into discrete, well-shaped epochs – be avoided?’ asks Hartman in *Scars of the Spirit*.<sup>83</sup> Contentment with the practise of close reading and interpretation may be the only content available for postmodernism.

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<sup>81</sup> Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>83</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 144.

## Conclusion

‘To receive is not to accept;  
between these, as between active and passive,  
critical thinking takes place, makes its place.’<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has identified some of Hartman’s main critical concerns, which continue to undergo revisions in his writing, and has brought these into conversation with selected postmodern texts. In looking closely at Douglas Coupland’s *JPod*, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, Irvine Welsh’s *Filth*, Brad Listi’s *Attention.Deficit.Disorder.* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Tent*, this thesis has examined the nature and position of the postmodern text in contemporary literature. By re-engaging Hartman’s criticism with questions related to the postmodern, I have demonstrated how Hartman’s theoretical contribution remains important for the reading of fiction. The methodological approach of a parallel development of the reading of the postmodern and the reading of Hartman has disclosed not only that Hartman is significant for our interpretation of the postmodern but also that his work is informed and reinvigorated by the questions posed through the postmodern novel.

This thesis testifies to the relevance, even necessity, of considering Hartman’s theoretical contribution when reading and interpreting postmodern literature. I began by outlining the main concerns that the reading of the postmodern text faces us with today and

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *A Critic’s Journey: Literary Reflections, 1958-1998* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 28.

by identifying and establishing some recurring concerns in Hartman's work, in order to explore and evaluate the relation of Hartman's critical developments to the postmodern text. Each following chapter focused on particular postmodern texts in order to investigate and link specific postmodern concerns, as they emerge from each text, to important aspects of Hartman's theoretical work. Starting with the thematic exploration of image, Chapter 2 examined the relation of Hartman's theory of representation to postmodern literature's extreme experimentation with typography. Chapter 3 addressed the postmodern text's play with the sonic aspects of the word, relating it to Hartman's understanding of the effects of intertextuality and the dispersal of meaning. The struggle for representation (Chapter 2) and the mutability of language (Chapter 3) are concerns that derive from the greater problematic of the relation of the individual to the world. What characterizes that relationship in the postmodern condition is transgression, and the chapter on Welsh's *Filth* explored the manifestations of transgression in the postmodern literary text and their relation to the understanding of the past and history. This chapter also considered where these transgressive elements lead literary criticism today. The transgression in the postmodern suggests the exceeding of borders and boundaries, which the chapter "The Text, the Step and the Walk" addressed. Taking into account Hartman's biographical and intellectual peripatetic, this chapter questioned whether revelation and definition are viable results of a postmodern quest. The last chapter of the thesis explored in more detail the nature of literary criticism in the postmodern era by examining the form of the essay and the role of metafiction.

I have not sought to resolve the problem of defining the postmodern, nor have I sought to reduce Hartman's critical thought to a digestible and economic size. Furthermore, at no point do the claims of this thesis support a view of Hartman's criticism as postmodern. Yet his work does engage with forms and ideas that relate to the concerns of postmodernism. In this sense, my thesis adds to postmodern discourse by not taking an explicitly postmodern

approach and celebrating, rejecting or oscillating between familiar approaches to the postmodern artefact. 'To receive is not to accept' writes Hartman and, accordingly, this thesis has attempted to retain a perceptual distance not only from postmodern theory but also from the work of Hartman. In this, I have recognized that Hartman's revisions and reinventions of his writings pre-empt and overcast any critique on his work from other commentators. Hartman's critical writings seem to breed imagination but leave us homeless (as in *Attention.Deficit.Disorder*) or orphaned (as in *The Tent*). Yet if the postmodern text reconstructs a place and time for everything, it caters also for (Hartman's) creative imagination, even if it is only for its deconstruction.

Postmodern fiction may be thought of as an accommodating space, a place where various debates about literature and the human condition become voiced. It is this dialogic aspect of postmodernism that Hutcheon seems to have in mind when she suggests that '[p]ostmodern art is a particularly didactic art: it teaches us about those countercurrents, if we are willing to listen.'<sup>2</sup> Yet, as we have seen, to think of postmodernism as didactic is paradoxical: postmodern thinkers are united in their objection to authority and grand narratives. This is perhaps why Hartman approaches the postmodern with such hesitation. Hartman's theoretical work does not aspire to be didactic; but it does 'listen' closely to the countercurrents that run through any text and, I argue, this is vital in teaching us *how* to listen to the postmodern text. Indeed, Hartman's unique ability to 'listen' to the functions and variations of the postmodern is the primary reason for bringing his work into conversation with postmodernism over the course of this thesis.

Postmodern literature requires the sort of hermeneutical tools that more familiar expressions of literary criticism have often struggled to provide. This is ironic given Hutcheon's suggestion that postmodern forms may teach us how to remain open to listen to

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 41.

‘the ex-centric, the off-center. Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy (cf. Bertens 1986, 46-7). It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities.’<sup>3</sup> By ‘ex-centric’, Hutcheon suggests not only ‘eccentricity’ but also a topological positioning in the accommodating space of the postmodern. The marginalized and peripheral come into greater focus in postmodernism, as established concepts come under scrutiny. Yet, as the tropes of the ‘ex-centric’ and ‘accommodating space’ remind us, the new focus requires careful formal consideration. Spatial metaphors reconstruct postmodernism as a system or a concept that can be shaped and suggest the ‘human urge to make order’ and create organizing structures. But the persistent commitment to order and structure is something that postmodernism is allegedly wary of and keen to interrogate. This contradiction is one of the reasons why Hartman resists the postmodern. He does so believing that the technique of reconstructing a system in order to conceptualize something as ambiguous and different is not wholly innocent. Hartman knows that such structures imply counteracting dialectic oppositions that may compete without finality. As Hutcheon correctly observes,

[t]he decentering of our categories of thought always relies on the centers it contests for its very definition (and often its verbal form). The adjectives may vary: hybrid, heterogenous, discontinuous, antitotalizing, uncertain. So may the metaphors: the image of the labyrinth without center or periphery might replace the conventionally ordered notion we usually have of a library (Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*) or the spreading rhizome might be a less repressively structuring concept than the hierarchical tree (Deleuze and

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<sup>3</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 41-2.

Guattari 1980). But the power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge.<sup>4</sup>

One might add that the same observation can be extended to the term ‘postmodernism’, undermining any approach that seeks to formulate a full understanding through spatial metaphors.

Hutcheon’s response to the void that emerges when writing about postmodernism is optimistic and constructive. She proposes that the ‘postmodern paradox should not lead to despair or complacency’ and that the postmodern can be approached as a ‘vehicle for aesthetic and even political consciousness-raising – perhaps the first and necessary step to any radical change.’<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon sees postmodernism as a function and as ‘an enabling first stage in its enacting of the contradictions inherent in any transitional moment: inside and yet outside, complicitous yet critical. Perhaps the postmodern motto should be that “Hail to the Edges!”<sup>6</sup> Of course, in the postmodern condition Hutcheon’s motto would have to be imagined as a graffiti on a wall, followed by the disclaimer “....says the Centre” added immediately underneath. While I am broadly sympathetic with a ‘position’ that refuses to think about postmodernism in nihilistic terms, it is difficult to imagine any progression emerging from the ‘off-center’ of postmodernism, the void that Hutcheon’s shaping of the postmodernism suggests. In practice postmodern criticism is more static than it would care to admit. Perhaps this is why a ‘movement’ associated with the play of shifting perspectives is not as alluring as it once was. The problem may not be so much with the commitment to interrogation but rather our own lack of attention to these shifts of thought and the ossification that accompanies the resulting absence of play.

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<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 73.



As we have seen, Hartman's incredulous response to postmodernism warns against indifference and insipidity. Hartman's reservations do not signal a rejection of the postmodern per se but they do interrogate our responses to this term. His warnings seem to relate to the ineffectiveness of the dialectic oppositions that postmodernism brings into its conversation. Hartman acknowledges the need for constructing some sort of system that might aid the process of understanding. His own theory of poetry at the start of his academic career aspired to construct a system that would act as a model for the consideration and interpretation of poetry. 'The formalism I retained' he writes in *A Scholar's Tale* 'expressed a hope that poetry mattered as well as history, that there would be some exit from history's bloodiness back to the more durable republic of the arts.'<sup>7</sup> His focus on the relationship between the place of inspiration and the inspired poet aimed to articulate a link between nature and poetic vision. Wordsworth, however, transgressed that system: despite having often grounded his poetry on the local and topological, Wordsworth's poetry exceeded the fixation of place and explored imagination, instead of perception. In his later work Hartman approached Wordsworth's difference as a positive progression and a reason to revise his theory of poetry. The beauty of Wordsworth had transformed the destruction of Hartman's system and resulted in a wound that was also a new world. Hartman's work holds no nostalgia for a lost order and when he seeks to explore the scars of the spirit, (the scars that 'are suffered in the pursuit – and imposition on others – of a transcendent ideal beyond earthly realization'), it is because he resists the indifference that lies suspended over a deadening nihilism.<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to relate Hartman's biographical and psychological development to the progression of his work. One could argue that as a displaced child Hartman found in

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale :Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), xi.

Wordsworth's poetry a place where he could belong, a place that transgresses the limitations of borders and perception. As a teenager in England, Hartman was safe again to explore the lengths of (his) imagination. But Hartman's home was poetry rather than Wordsworth, the English language rather than England. In *A Scholar's Tale* he writes that in the absence of family 'I adopted myself out to words blowing in the wind and insights that detached themselves from what I read promiscuously in the little tomes of the Schocken Verlag or whatever book I carried about like a talisman. [...] Was a making the book, or the aura of great books, my homeland? But the curious fact is I did not feel like an exile. I was the Unexile.'<sup>9</sup> Hartman is aware that language is not a house and if it is, it is a house of leaves. Still, I believe that Hartman's mind did transpose the book as a homeland; it was just that Hartman's perception of a book was a more unusual one from the start. Despite his own claims regarding the failure of his pursuit of Jewish studies, Hartman sees a 'midrashic' hermeneutic at the heart of his interpretative work. Midrash offers a specific approach for the interpretation of biblical texts. As James L. Kugel explains in 'Two Introductions to Midrash',

the Hebrew word *midrash* might be best translated as "research," a translation that incorporates the word's root meaning of "search out, inquire" and perhaps as well suggests that the results of that research are almost by definition *recherché*, that is, not obvious, out-of-the-way, sometimes far-fetched. The word has been used to designate both the activity of interpretation and the fruits of that activity, and in Hebrew writings it was used extensively for the collective body of all such

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<sup>9</sup> Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale*, 147-8.

interpretations as well as in the name of certain collections of midrashic material (Midrash Rabbah, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

In midrash the explanatory or exegetical text that follows the biblical verse becomes part of the corpus of that biblical verse and circulates by taking a life of its own. Hartman's exegetical methods for literature and his approach of literary criticism as both creative and scientific appear to have their roots in this hermeneutical approach. In midrash we find the interpretation of texts. What remains outside are 'myths of private genius' and individual talent.<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps why Hartman's critical style appears self-renouncing to a lot of his commentators. Unlike Hassan, who moves from the subjectivity of postmodernism to the subjectivity of personal perception and an autobiographical style, Hartman insists on the mutability of language rather than his own experiences, even in the writing of his memoirs. The blurring of the lines between primary and secondary texts that midrash enacts may also explain Hartman's approach of literary criticism, which rejects firm division between the critical and the creative.<sup>12</sup>

Hartman embodies what Hutcheon describes as an ex-centric position, and this eccentricity or ex-centricity extends to his reading of the postmodern. Hartman's imagination and use of metaphoric and lyrical language in his criticism may 'decentre' his critics but he remains clear about his opinion of today's critical style of writing. Despite the intended contribution of postmodern thought to criticism, Hartman notes that critical writing today is still encouraged to come up with all-encompassing terms and/or map out the movement of a concept. For Hartman, this results in a deliberating avoidance that proclaims nothing other than the impossibility of proclamations and definitions. Without trying to absent himself from

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick eds. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Hartman, Budick eds. *Midrash and Literature*, xii.

<sup>12</sup> A midrashic function can also be detected on the internet today. Blogs and online social sites are composed by the publishing of a mixture of facts and fiction and resurface on the web by assuming in their own entity.

this critical field altogether, Hartman argues that his style both asserts and, at other times, forfeits all judgement. This is part of his willingness to expose himself repeatedly to alternate ways of thinking. Consequently, and as I have argued in this thesis, Hartman does not remain an innocent bystander to the postmodern and he is more engaged with some of its concerns than one might initially think.

Hartman seems to know all too well that, as Hutcheon suggests, ‘one of the lessons of the doubleness of postmodernism is that you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value, you *choose* to challenge’,<sup>13</sup> although his reference point is hermeneutics rather than postmodernism:

Hermeneutics, then, retains its importance for any horizon of truth because of its age-long experience with the necessity of (re)interpretation. It exposes the deceiving simplicity of the media we use for communication while engaging the never entirely transparent meanings accumulated and sedimented by tradition. These meanings can be simplified, but the ethical risk of so doing is greater than that of remaining aware of their plural nature. Once language, symbolism, and tradition are seen to be depositories of a “generous error” (this is how Shelley, the English poet, puts it), not completely separable from truth by future enlightenments, then a double hermeneutic is necessary: of restoration as well of suspicion, to employ the useful terms introduced by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.<sup>14</sup>

A hermeneutics of restoration would treat postmodernism as more than a historical or cultural reference point and it does not consider suspicion to be the only mode of interpretation. Instead, it teaches interpreters the value of interrogation and helps us approach

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<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit*, 140.

postmodernism as an idea in the making rather than the making of an idea. Through its realisation of history and form, Hartman's work reminds us that in the formulation of the postmodern our critical positioning can only be temporal and thus revisable.

Underlying this thesis has been the question of 'What remains today, for us, here, now of a Hartman?' to paraphrase and adapt Derrida's opening words in *Glas*. Derrida's inquiry is about Hegel and it is not my wish to suggest a Hegelian strain in Hartman. Rather, I suggest that something of Hartman's romanticism – his imaginative readings and unanswered philosophical concerns – is infused by the postmodern condition and demands to be addressed. This sense of urgency becomes evident in the critical aspirations of a definition of the postmodern and in the cultural confusion and anxiety that surrounds the postmodern condition. What remains of Hartman in this postmodern world is the understanding that his polymorphic and amphibious writing can survive and even thrive in the fluidity of the postmodern text. What remains of *a* Hartman has been my work here.

It has not been my wish to establish or defend a Hartmanian thesis but rather to pave the progress from the individual man (*Hartman*) to his art (*Hartman*) and for that, as I have argued, the postmodern lenses serve to expand, multiply and enrich Hartman's word. When interpreting the postmodern text, inspired by Hartman's considerations and concerns, postmodernity becomes more than an epoch; it becomes a text again. Despite its experimental, transformative and transgressive form that seeks to exceed the limitations of a book, postmodern literature needs to be read for what it is: the fiction of our times. The tension spots that each chapter of this thesis has explored (representation, multiplicity of meaning, transgression, intellectual journeys and the nature and role of the critical essay today) are not so much attempts to appropriate the postmodern text to postmodernism or Hartman's theoretical contribution as attempts to focus on the *reading* of the (postmodern) text. In following Hartman's close(r) reading, this thesis has not ignored philosophical or

theoretical concerns but aspired to relate to the postmodern text in an original fashion and move literary criticism beyond matters of taste to question the development of postmodern discourse. As such, my thesis contributes to contemporary literary criticism and reinvents Hartman's work by arguing that the novel is not exhausted in the postmodern condition and that it continues to evolve in compelling ways.

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